# Prologue

"Hu..."

I could not help sighing aloud as I opened the newspapers and the glanced at the headlines as I supported my jaw on my palms.

On the third page of the newspaper, a bold headline announced: "35 Students Suffer Mass Hysteria"

That incident occured the day before in a public high school in Chiba. Apparantly, a student complaint during class that his foot had been bitten by a black dog that could not be seen by the naked eye. Subsequently that caused a large uproar.

"Ah..."

I am Taniyama Mai, a sixteen year old student. Although this is self proclaimed, I am a very ordinary and proper student (it is true!) I only have a strange part time job. And that strange job is right here where I am reading the papers - "Shibuya Psychic Research".

Located in an office building in Shibuya, Tokyo, "Shibuya Psychic Research" is a company that investigates paranormal incidents. That is, we investigate ghosts and super powers, and other supernatural phenomenon.

Working at such a place, there are times when I have to work at haunted houses. Of course, one should experience as much as one can in one's lifetime. Like meeting ghosts, and making friends with girls with psychic powers, to name a few.

However, even to one as experienced as I, the article still caught my interest.

While I was re-reading the article for the multipleth time, Chiaki sempai interrupted.

"Wha~at's up, Mai?" Raising her head from her book, Chiaki said, looking at me.

Kasai Chiaki is eighteen years old - a student in a Tokyo Girls High School with psychic powers. Although she is skilled in bending spoons, she is currently somewhat depressed. To shake off her depression, she is currently undergoing training at "Shibuya Psychic Reserach".

"What Happened?"

In response to her query, I showed her the article of interest.

"Look at this. It concerns that Ryokuryou High School again."

Ryokuryou High School. A school that has appeared in the news many times in the past week.

"Them again? What happened this time?"

"They say someone was bitten by a black dog and caused a commotion in the classroom."

"Dog?"

"Eh. Although the teacher could not see it, students claim to have been bitten and caused a rukus. Furthermore, amongst those who claim to have been bitten, some have what appears to be wounds caused by a dog bite or something similar."

"Ah... And the reason?"

"It was explained as mass hysteria. 'We believe that due to the spate of recent inexplicable occurences in the same school, some aggitated students experienced mild hysteria, and spread the hysteria to other students.' Is what they say."

"But, wasn't someone injured? What was that about?"

"Unexplained."

"Forget it. This is a common occurence."

Within a month, Ryokuryou High School has already been on the news 4 times.

"What was the first incident?"

"Mass absenteesm."

The first incident was: all the girls in a certain class claimed that there were ghosts and refused to attend school.

The next report was about mass poisoning. Nearly half of the students in a class suddenly felt nauseous and unwell. Although it looked similar to food poisoning, the conclusion was that it was not. The real reason for that incident is still unknown.

Chiaki sempai rolled her eyes.

"Eh... And was the next incident was the fires in the locker room?"

"It is as you say. Since autum, there were a series of fires in the gymnasiums' locker room. When it came out, it was quickly published on the news."

"Wasn't it arson?"

"About that, it is said that the teachers seriously took watch. They even put locks on the door. No one should have been able to enter, but the fires continued to occur."

As I was saying that, I picked up scissors to cut out the problematic piece of news. While cutting, I continued, "And the next incident was the fourth incident about the exorcism.

"The students thought that there was something haunting the school, and attempted an exorcism." Chiaki sempai counted on her fingers.

"Some time ago, there was a student who commited suicide."

"Eh, about nine months ago there was a male student who committed suicide. Apparently the students believed the spirit of that student was haunting the school. They gathered in the gynmasium to exorcise the spirit but the teachers stopped them. In the end the exorcism became a fight."

"So, is this the fifth incident?"

Chiaki sempai glanced at my clippings. At this time, someone spoke up suddenly behind us.

"What fifth incident?"

When we looked at the door where the voice came from, we saw Taka taking off her coat.

Taka, whose full name is Takahashi Yuuko, is seventeen years old, a student and Chiaki Sempai's underclassman. Although we first encountered her when she requested the help of "Shibuya Psychic Research", recently she has been working odd jobs here.

Taka rushed over and looked at the items in our hands.

"What is it?"

Chiaki sempai showed the newspaper clippings to Taka.

"Ryokuryou High School. Another incident occured."

"Them again? Incredible!"

I concur with Taka's words.

"You think so too? If that's the case, then it is incredible indeed."

"Exactly."

Chiaki sempai was shocked.

"Incredible?"

I nodded.

"Because that, supposed unexplained incident..."

"Or rather, strange occurence..."

"Or more accurately, paranormal phenomenon. This type of things tend not to be discussed openly in public, and happen without anyone noticing. Don't you think so?"

"Yeah. Like with the incident at our school - in the end it was not publicly announced."

"Eh, eh. But for them, the headline was printed so boldly on the papers."

"And they are even on primetime television."

"It's really incredible."

"Yeah."

Chiaki sempai looked at us, giving up on arguing with Taka and I, who were nodding in agreement.

"... is it like that."

"It is exactly like that."

Still nodding, Taka grabbed my mug.

"Come on."

"Forget it."

Saying that, I finished the water remaining in the mug.

"However, boss is not interested. Such a huge incident is an opportunity to make us famous overnight."

Chiaki sempai and I were shocked by Taka's words.

"... Why is that?"

"Ah? Haven't you heard from boss?"

I have not heard of it - nothing whatsoever.

"He came yesterday - the principal of Ryokuryou High School."

What?!

"ge, ge..." laughed Taka.

"The fact is, our company is famous within the education community. Just look at it: haven't we solved cases in both Mai's and my school? Therefore he came with his request."

Oh... so it was like this.

Sigh... Because I had something up in school yesterday, I took leave from work, and regretfully missed this incident. At least I wanted to see the principal's face... although that doesn't really matter.

Chiaki sempai whispered,

"Then what happened? Was he rejected?"

"Eh. It was an immediate rejection. He said he did not like highly publicised incidents."

That's such a waste.

Chiaki sempai thought so too.

"It is regretful to do that."

"Exactly. If we solve su~uch a large incident, the company would shoot to instant fame. We would get interviewed by the media and other stuff."

"Boss, too, would be an instant celebrity."

"Yeah. Boss is really handsome, so he'll probably get a fanclub."

... as... as if that would happen. No... I am uncertain about this. Anyway, he only looks handsome, his personality is really terrible.

As that thought passed through my head, Taka and Chiaki sempai looked at me meaningfully.

"...what?!"

"Great, he rejected the principal." Taka stated the fact softly.

"Yes, yes. We won't be getting any new rivals this way."

Even Chiaki sempai was like this.

Let's not talk about it any more - the person in question is just in the next room - what would we do if he overheard?

The boss of "Shibuya Psychic Research", Shibuya Kazuya, is a surprising seventeen years of age. While he is clearly very young, he has a high class office in the prime business district. He is handsome and talented and such a complete narcissist that even Buddha would run barefoot away upon meeting him. I call him, in short, Naru.

Furthermore, there was a female (I shan't reveal her name for the sake of her reputation) who asked him out; to which that bastard replied: "I'm really sorry, but I'm more used to looking at my reflection in the mirror." That is, "I am used to seeing such beauty in my own reflection so I will not date your type."

Let's not joke here. If I were at the receiving end of that, even suicide would be

a viable option. - Sometimes I do think deeply about this type of sitation.

Someone opened the office door. In the doorway stood a male about my age. To yours truly who greeted him, he said with great difficulty, "I am Yasuhara from Ryokuryou High School."

When he saw the beautiful male coming from the boss's office, Yasuhara was really shocked. Whatever, that is a common occurrence. To this day, amongst all our clients, Yasuhara was one of the fastest to regain his cool.

With an anxious expression, Yasuhara bowed to Naru who was sitting opposite.

"I am the student council president of Ryokuryou High School, Yasuhara Osamu. This -"

He retrieved a stack of papers from his bag and handed it to Naru.

"I have collected the student's petition. I represent the entire student body to ask a favour of you."

Yasuhara folded his tall body and bowed deeply to Naru.

"Please accept our principal's request."

Naru took the petition and placed it on the table. Pale fingers pinched together, he rested his hand on his knee.

"Regarding this situation, I have already refused your principal yesterday." Yasuhara looked directly at Naru.

"I know. I already know of your rejection. Despite that, I still would like to ask for your help." said Yasuhara seriously.

"Just as you know, the situation in school is really serious. But what worries everyone the most is the media's attention. At first it was just some wild rumours; recently the situation has escalated such that people are getting hurt. If this continues, who knows what might happen. Please, help us."

Naru considered a moment, and replied,

"To tell the truth, I am really interested in the situation in Ryokuryou High

School. However, I would prefer to avoid the media's attention."

"I understand where you are coming from. Right now, I am one of many who is troubled by this situation. Therefore I truly hope that the situation can be resolved as soon as possible. "Currently, horrifying rumours are all over school. We all feel unsettled and insecure, and the atmosphere is gloomy. That petition..."

Yasuhara eyed the petition lying on the table.

"This was collected, just this morning between when I heard of your rejection of our principal's request and before I left school, to ask that you reconsider. It only took about half a day. Despite the short time we collected so many signatures."

With this, he bowed yet again.

"We really need you help. Please - you must help us."

Naru was deep in thought.

I stood at the side feeling anxious; agreeing to help would resolve everything. However, I kept mum. Naru isn't the type who would listen to me or anyone and change his mind.

Naru closed his black eyes and thought about the case without moving; Yasuhara quietly observed Naru. Before long, Naru looked up and turned towards me.

"Mai, give Ryokuryou High School a call."

My heart flew with happiness.

"Tell the principal, if he has yet to decide on a substitute investigator, we will accept his request."

Yes! Just like this!

# Chapter 1 - Don't Play with Spirits, Children

## 1

We set off to Ryokuryou High School. This was the second day.

It is 3 hours away from the office by car. After passing through Funabashi and Chiba, with a view of Yokosuka and its surrounds across the ocean, is the school's compound.

This time the investigators include Naru, his assistant Lin-san and me. Regretfully Taka and Chiaki-sempai remained in the office.

And there were the usual 4 psychic users.

Bou-san, John, the Miko and Masako.

Although these members have worked together often in the past, this was the first time we started a case with the intention of cooperating. The shocking thing is this time, Naru contacted them, saying "I hope to have your help".

After checking everyone's schedule, we made our plans. First to enter the school was Naru, Bou-san and myself. Based on our preliminary investigations, we would discuss what equipment we would need, and Lin-san and the Miko would bring them. Masako and John had plans they could not get out of, and would come the next day.

Ryokuryou High School is a rather dislikable school.

Although I say that, I don't mean that it is an eerie place or anything like that.

First, when we arrived at the back gate at the appointed time, there was a teacher waiting for us. However, that teacher's attitude was terrible. Even when

we greeted him, he didn't even acknowledge us with a nod.

After entering the back gate, the teacher took us to the principal's office. The principal was even worse. His attitude was incredibly arrogant, his tone very impolite. Furthermore, although he requested our company to do an investigation, he did not trust us and made no attempt to hide it.

And then, the finishing blow was the guidance teacher Matsuyama-sensei.

"Are you the head?" he asked Naru as he brought us to the meeting room that was to be the headquarters of our investigation.

How could that person speak like that to someone he has just met?!

Matsuyama-sensei looked at us judgmentally - "All this commotion about spirits - there's nothing more nonsensical and stupid." - and flung out such a line.

That bastard, who does he think he is?

Matsuyama-sensei glared at us with naked contempt while we were too shocked to reply. His gaze finally settled on Naru.

"Just how old are you anyway?", he asked.

"Seventeen."

"What about Senior High?"

"Please use your own imagination."

Matsuyama-sensei snorted in laughter at that and turned his head to look at me.

"And you?"

"Sixteen. First year of Senior High."

"Don't you have school today? Playing truant, aren't you? Where's your school? Let's hear it."

So what if he knows which high school I go to? Contact the school and have them give me demerit points? Firstly, even if I told you the name of the school, would you even know where the school was?

"I have already been granted permission by my school."

When I said that, Matsuyama-sensei showed me a hate-filled glare.

"It's a really leniently managed school, to be so lax."

Don't you stick your nose into other schools' business. I really like my own school.

Matsuyama (I will address him without an honorific from now on) hurried through the school's corridors.

"Belief in the supernatural is a recent fad; when one thinks like that, one gets lazy, hence its popularity. When brats who have not even completed their compulsory education are bound by such beliefs about super powers and UFOs, they use these non-existent things to escape from reality. Furthermore, taking advantage of the situation, conmen come to mingle. Youths these days for no good reason, can't seem to do work reliably."

...Conmen. Was that referring to us? How dare he call us, well-behaved and honest workers, conmen?!

Come on Naru, hurry up and refute him. When, if not now, are you going to use that normally poisonous tongue of yours?

But Naru was silent. Even Bou-san made no reply.

Matsuyama sneered at us mockingly.

"Recently amongst these fraudulent neo-religions, it looks like even girls have been implicated in these malicious situations, right?"

Hmph... Just as I was about to express my displeasure, Bou-san started speaking in a seldom used, quiet, extremely polite tone.

Bou-san, Takigawa Housou, age 25, is a monk from Mt. Koya. He has a day job as a studio musician. He manages band activities on one hand, and is a psychic power user on the other. In other words, he is multitalented.

"If we are talking about the recently popular small scale religious groups, I think it is more accurate to call them New Rising Religions."

"What?"

Matsuyama looked unprepared for that attack.

Bou-san continued his act and said, "that is to say, recent - in what they call the Third Age of Religion that we are currently in the midst of; about the rapidly spawning witchcraft based small scale religious groups, they should be called New Rising Religions to be accurate."

Matsuyama looked like he was about to say something, but Bou-san did not give him a chance to interrupt.

"And if we are discussing these New Rising Religions, these are the ones that came chronologically after the Second Age of Religion. This is common knowledge."

"Such small details don't matter!" roared Matsuyama. Bou-san smiled a satisfied smile.

"So it is. But, don't you feel that arguments based on mistaken knowledge are meaningless?

"No, Sensei might have only been slightly misinformed; but if you are really unaware, I can enlighten you. Even though you are an educator; to allow you to persist in your misunderstanding is unthinkable."

Instantly, Matsuyama was speechless.

Success. Well done, Bou-san.

"As long as people don't mess up the essential parts in life, that is enough! What the heck, you people! I don't know if it is the attraction of boring religion, or if there is something strange going on in the depths of your minds; a student like you who is clearly skiving, and a man like you who keeps his hair long and messy will sooner or later wind up on the wrong path!"

That... What? Is he trying to say that we're walking a path forbidden to man?

That bastard!!

"Is it here?"

Naru pointed to a door; above the door hung a sign, "Meeting Room".

"Yes."

Matsuyama said as he violently opened the door.

# 2

When the door opened, student council president Yasuhara was waiting for us inside.

He rose upon seeing Naru.

"I've been waiting for a long time."

Naru nodded in greeting towards Yasuhara. Matsuyama spoke up.

"Yasuhara, don't you need to be in class?"

"The third year's class time has already been greatly reduced."

Oya, so Yasuhara is a third year. It is rare for a student to continue to be council president in the last month of his third year.

"No problems with exams?"

"Please do not worry."

Yasuhara was clearly forcing his expression.

Looking slightly put off, Matsuyama sat heavily on the chair.

"Now what? What do you do first?"

He looked at us sarcastically.

"Start a fire, and then chant scriptures?"

The corners of Matsuyama's lips raised slightly in a hint of a smirk. He's a really irritating fellow.

We ignored Matsuyama's presence.

To Bou-san's question, "How shall we start our investigation now?" Naru glanced at his watch.

"So we shall. Let’s start by seeking out students involved in the various

incidents to understand the situation."

After saying that, Naru turned to me and continued.

"Ignore the case of the small fires. Go and look for the students involved in the other three incidents."

How do I find them?

Before I could reply, Yasuhara cut in.

"Let me do it."

"That would be much faster. Thanks."

"Sure."

Matsuyama sat on the chair, looking on as we spoke.

Naru bowed slightly to Matsuyama.

"Thank you very much for your help. Sensei may return to your office. We do not require further assistance."

"That won't do. It is my job to manage students.

"These supposed students may not leave the field of vision of the teacher."

Yasuhara's expression hardened with anger. Naru, still expressionless, calmly continued.

"Anyone involved in these incidents is considered our client. We need to maintain the privacy of our clients."

"Do children have any privacy to speak of?"

Sure they do!

I could not help getting increasingly angry. Naru remained calm throughout.

"Regardless of age, clients are clients. Now please leave."

"Do you mean to say you will be inconvenienced by my presence?"

Uncle, who do you think you are, you bastard.

Bou-san said angrily, "The principal said we would have freedom to do our work."

"Even if it was freedom it would be limited. I'd like to hear what you self-proclaimed psychics are up to under the guise of mingling with our students."

"In that case, please go to the principal's office."

Naru's reply caused Matsuyama to be temporarily lost for words.

That's right. The one who summoned us had always been the principal.

Matsuyama's face was crimson with anger. He straightened his back and looked like he had something to say, but only creased his lips in disapproval and stood up. Hastily he left the meeting room and fired his parting shot as he stalked through the doorway.

"Do as you please. Whatever happens at the end of the day is the principal's responsibility!"

Such irresponsible words!

What could happen? What was he talking about?

After that, Matsuyama slammed the door with enough violence to shake the walls, and exited the scene.

# 3

"Despicable bastard!!! Just because he is the scum of human society, he looks like others as though they are the same as him!" I could not help shrieking in the direction Matsuyama disappeared in.

"Teachers, educators; what are teachers! Aren't teachers supposed to be role models for students?!"

Haaa. Haaa. Oh my, I hate this type of immoral, rude, and tyrannical bastard the most.

Crap. When I noticed, Yasuhara was already looking at me, shocked.

Ah ah, I'm in really deep trouble now.

Then he gurgled with laughter.

"Well said!"

Huh? I'm saved?

Bou-san let out a sigh of relief.

"It's not like we're trying to be his friends. For me, I was eagerly anticipating when Naru's poison tongue would make its appearance."

Yeah, me too.

Naru gently shrugged his shoulders, wearing that godly expression of his.

"It's meaningless to preach to a pig." Naru said with great gravity.

He's really, really incredible.

The truth was that Naru was also angry.

"Yasuhara-kun, could I trouble you to have the people involved gather here. Could you send them here in order?"

"Yes. Leave it to me."

Yasuhara nodded and sprinted out of the meeting room.

The first persons Yasuhara brought in were a group of girls. They were the girls involved in the mass absenteeism, from class 2-5.

"And the representative is?"

"I am Okamura Kazumi."

Naru opened his notebook.

"Please tell us how the incident occurred."

Okamura-san bobbed her head. Clearing her throat, she said: "Spirits appeared in the LL classroom. Then, we were afraid and refused to attend class. Even though we told the teacher, we would only get scolded. There was no other choice except for us to all take leave from school."

She said that forcefully.

"What type of spirits appeared in the LL classroom?"

"It was a child, a little boy."

"Has Okamura-san seen it with your own eyes?"

"I've seen it."

Her reply was short and crisp. Poor dear, her face was turning green. She definitely had encountered a really frightening thing.

"It started with the voices. When I played a tape that I previously recorded, I realized there was some sound I hadn't heard before in the background. I thought it was the voice of a child."

"Could you hear what he was saying clearly?"

"No. The voice was soft, not at the level where I could discern what was said. Subsequently..."

She paused.

"There was someone touching my leg."

Naru signaled her to continue.

"I was shocked and looked down. Under the table there was a boy grasping my

leg."

She hurried on.

"There's barely any space under the table for a child. Although that's the way it should be, there really was a child there, just kneeling under the table. Even now, I still clearly recall what he looks like. A boy, about six years old, and he wore a Goosebumps inspiring smile on his face!

"Finally it became the sound of weeping.

"I was shocked and jumped out of my chair, shrieking. Just as I was about to call the teacher to inform him about the boy, when I looked down again, he had already disappeared. The teacher did not believe me, but there really was someone there!"

Naru nodded. Okamura-san relaxed upon seeing the acknowledgement.

Naru looked at the rest of the girls.

"Is there anyone else who has seen this spirit?"

All five girls raised their hands in response.

Naru questioned them individually. Everyone had experienced incidents similar to Okamura-san.

"Besides the persons here, is there anyone else who has seen it?"

Naru asked. Okamura-san nodded.

"There are about two more persons. Many more have heard the voice."

"How many?"

The girls all pulled faces. Then, "probably everyone has heard it," was the reply.

"What about students in other classes?"

"I know a few who say they have seen it; it looks like there are large numbers who have heard the voice."

Naru nodded.

Bou-san was writing something with blue ink on the floor plans provided by the school.

Naru showed a thoughtful expression before continuing.

"Finally, have you heard of the other incidents that have happened in the school?"

The group looked at each other, and Okamura-san responded once again with a hardened expression.

"They say Sakauchi-kun has appeared in school."

"And this Sakauchi-kun is?"

"A first year student who died in September."

Ah... That male student who committed suicide... a common plot device in regular ghost stories.

"In school, one feels that someone has brushed pass; and some things have appeared in the classroom. Then... more recently, there have been new Seven Wonders..."

The other girls started speaking.

"Yeah, that's been there for ages. The rumors have increased, not about that, there are new stories."

One of the girls started counting off on her fingers.

"First, 'The Unopenable Safe'. Following that, 'The Dismembered Human Model'. And then there was, 'The Man Who Jumped'. A man appeared to jump from the school's roof, but on closer look, there was no one... next was..."

"'The Old Man of the Furnace', when the lid of the furnace was opened, the face of an old man appeared inside. 'The Reversed Mirror'."

"Oh, yes. Doesn't the mirror in the gym's toilet often show reflections of objects that are in reverse?"

"And 'The Geography Room'? When it was cleaned, the fluorescent light fell."

"Eh? What about 'Footsteps in the Chemistry Lab' there's that, right?"

"And 'The Sickbay'? The second to the last bed would suddenly appear to have been slept in."

Everyone reported various strange incidents, and the meeting room became very noisy.

That is, the so called "Seven Unthinkables", was, in general, more than seven such tall tales. Despite that, the sheer volume of the stories gave me a bad feeling. The floor plan Bou-san was writing on was soon covered with blue.

Naru had everyone quiet down.

"Thank you everyone. We will investigate the situation properly."

# 4

Following that was the group that planned the exorcism. There were eight males and females in the group.

Naru asked them who their representative was. After squabbling amongst themselves for the position, they finally decided on a girl called Araki Kozue-san to speak for the group.

"Then, Araki-san, please tell us how the incident progressed."

"Oh, where should I begin... My classroom is located in the East Block. This supposed "East Block" is basically made up of special classrooms, like the chemistry lab *etc.* The room neighboring my classroom is the Music Preparation Room. It is used to store musical instruments. Strange sounds came from there."

"And these strange sounds are..."

"Sounds of things being dragged on the floor; and the noises were loud and clear. The teacher also appeared to hear it and went next door to check, but said there was no one there.

"There were also strange sounds being heard in the LL classroom. Although I have never heard it myself, many others have.

"Besides that, there was that day when my class was in charge of cleaning the geography classroom: when we were cleaning, the bulb of the fluorescent light dropped down. Or rather, the fluorescent tube. In any case just one tube fell out. The tube shattered and the shards of glass flew all over the place, so there were many people who were injured. Although we reported it to the teacher, he could only tell us to be careful; the problem was not solved at all."

She looked both angry and frightened.

"And besides that there were the fires; everyone says they started last autumn. More accurately, they started since that first year student committed suicide.

I'm convinced all these are linked, but the school does not take any action."

"So you decided to take matters into your own hands?"

"Yes. Because if we leave things as they are, who knows how many people would be hurt the next time? The teachers are useless. If it were us, we might be able to do something. Unlike what the news and tv claims, we are not entirely certain that these incidents are the fault of Sakauchi-kun; but to take no action? With no action we would never know if it was good or bad, so..."

"So it was like that."

"Does Araki-san know Sakauchi-kun?"

"No. I only knew of his existence after the incident."

"It looked like he left a suicide note... do you know of the details?"

"Yes. It was famous instantly: 'I'm not a dog'."

Not a dog...

"Do you know what it means?"

"I feel I can understand what he meant. Because sometimes I feel like a dog or some cattle. I'm micromanaged from the color of my hair to the color of my personal belongings; I'd get lectured for things from my language use to my attitude: it's just like disciplining a dog. That suicide note probably referred to something like this."

Ah ah, I understand where she is coming from. My school's school rules are not strict, but it's not like I don't know how strict the rules are in other schools. Not long ago, when I heard there was a rule like this: "the maximum time for a toilet break is three minutes", I wondered: did the makers of the rule have people in mind when they made it?

"And then I thought, Sakauchi-kun must have hated the school; there are some people who say they have seen the ghost of Sakauchi-kun. That's why I thought the students of the school could properly console the soul of Sakauchi-kun. However the teachers did not allow us to do so. Somehow teachers always think that a gathering of large group of students means we are up to no good."

Eh eh. If it was Matsuyama, I'd easily believe he could say such things.

Naru gently nodded.

"And besides these, would you know about the strange incidents that happened in this school?"

They, too, related countless tales experienced by themselves or their close friends.

Bou-san, looking frustrated, had given up taking notes midway.

After Araki-san's group left, the next group was represented by Miyasaki Masayo-san. This group had claimed to have been bitten by the black dog.

Disregarding the already frustrated monk and myself, Naru continued his questioning patiently.

"Then, Miyasaki-san?"

Looking small surrounded by her friends, Miyasaki-san raised her head. Her foot was bound by a white bandage.

"Please."

"Yes. That..."

She scanned the room, frightened, before slowly starting to speak.

"Starting this autumn, strange things have been happening in our class. That is... we heard strange sounds; like the whining of a dog, with "he... he..." like breathing sounds. It was very discomforting. Then... who knows when... people started getting leg wounds. That was about December. It was just like being bitten by a dog, there were even bite marks."

"Is that victim currently here?"

Naru scanned the group. A frail looking male student had raised his hand.

"What was the situation?"

"That is, while many described hearing the dog's sounds, I have never heard it, and I thought they were only lies. Then one day during class I suddenly felt pain in my foot. It was a sudden spike of pain. I examined my foot after class and found a bite mark. As I was wearing long pants it wasn't a big deal, there was only a little blood; there were also puncture holes through the uniform."

Naru nodded, and turned once more to Miyasaki-san and had her continue.

"Yes... After that incident similar incidents would occasionally occur, but no one ever saw the dog... until recently..."

"On the day of that incident, who was the first to be bitten?"

Naru asked. One of the girls replied.

"It was I."

"And what happened?"

That girl shrugged.

"Nothing much, I was just suddenly bitten by something. There are around 5 others who were bitten after that. I realized what had happened and jumped up in shock. The teacher asked me what had happened; I said I had been bitten. And then the student beside me pointed to the side of my foot and said: 'there's a dog.' When I looked down, I saw a black dog running past my foot."

"Nearly everyone in the class saw the dog?"

Miyasaki-san nodded. Then, in a whisper, "It was actually a lie."

Eh?

"I mean, the teacher said he did not see the dog; that was a lie. Because, the teacher fled the classroom with us. But on the papers, the teacher nevertheless claimed not to have seen it. Then we asked that teacher, he denied seeing it."

All the students nodded in agreement to Miyasaki-san's words.

"Does anybody have any theories about the reason for the appearance of the dog?"

Naru asked. A different male student said, "Initially it wasn't a dog but a fox."

"A fox?"

"Yes. For a period of time, our school... eh?"

He looked around him. The 2 female students sitting on either side of him continued urgently, "Please, what was it?"

"Trying to hide it won't work; the briefest investigation would reveal all."

She said this, looking straight at Nrau.

"For a period of time, it was very popular to play Kokkuri-san (summoning Fox Spirit) in our school. Because of that, we thought it was a fox doing the haunting. All this while, until we saw the dog, everyone believed it was just a fox."

Naru's expression turned solemn.

"Our school is managed very strictly; if we were caught the punishment would be severe. Everyone was playing in secret, it was really popular."

Miyasaki-san said, stuttering.

"Probably very few have not played."

"Is there anyone amongst you who have not played?"

Naru's question did not receive a single reply.

Naru nodded in understanding, and asked if they knew of the other strange incidents in the school. Like the last time, there were so many peculiar stories that I could faint.

# 5

The last to enter was the group who had suffered mass poisoning.

Student Council President Yasuhara showed in six students, and seated himself too.

"That is to say Yasuhara was also one of the victims?"

Yasuhara smiled at Naru's question.

"Yes. I am also one of the 'students with weak constitutions'. Whatever the question, fire away."

Oh yes, the newspaper report wrote "we believe that students with weak constitutions were brought down for some reason". The correspondent had tried his best to rationalize the incident. Whether we looked at Yasuhara or any of the others, none of them appeared frail.

Naru's expression momentarily softened.

"In that case, let me ask your representative, Yasuhara. What are the details?"

"Perhaps you already know from reading the newspapers, the incident occurred on the 18th of December, Monday, at 2pm in the middle of class."

Straight to the point and easily understood. Yasuhara is really an intelligent person.

"Nearly half the class collapsed, to be precise there were 19 persons.

"At the beginning of class there was already a male student who felt nauseous. Just as he deliberated leaving the class, suddenly there appeared many others saying the same thing. I was wondering what was going on, when I too suddenly felt unwell. From the start of the class, I had thought that the air in the classroom was somehow bad. There was a strange stench; we opened the windows; but we continued to discuss what the source of the smell was so

everyone was restless during break, that's why that made an impression."

"So it was like that. Do you know of the cause?"

"No. When the furnace burns wrong, one's mood is affected, although it isn't that big a deal; it a similar type of feeling. I have previously eaten raw food and experienced food poisoning, and it felt totally different from this incident. This incident had nothing to do with food poisoning. Furthermore, the school uses air conditioning, hence eliminating the possibility of a gas leak."

En en.

"Does this stench persist in the classroom?"

Yasuhara nodded.

"We are all numb to it so we are not sure if it is still there, but even now one can smell slight traces of that stench. When students from other classes visit our classroom, they would all ask, 'what's this odor?'

"And there are times when the smell would suddenly become overwhelming. After that incident, there were also instances when the teacher first felt unwell. At that time everyone evacuated the classroom with a sense of dread, although only the teacher went to the sickbay. And after that, I can recall there were also several occasions when the stench suddenly became much stronger. Yes, about seven or eight times since that incident."

"Were there any victims?"

Yasuhara shook his head.

"No. Or rather... Initially I did not believe this was a supernatural phenomenon. Our classroom is on the first floor; below... I mean what was further beneath, that is, in the stratum there is a pool of bad gas, was what I hypothesized to be the reason. However, Eda..."

Yasuhara turned back to look at the male next to him.

"This fellow would scatter salt whenever the stench grew strong. After doing so the foul smell would suddenly vanish. What the heck, if it was explained as a natural phenomenon, that would be really weird."

Naru looked at the male student called Eda.

"Why scatter salt?"

"That, because don't they say that salt is cleansing? We throw salt when we return from funerals and other stuff. So I felt that we could try it in school to see if it worked. After scattering the salt the stench disappeared instantly."

"Feeling...?"

He scratched his head.

"Anyway, at the end of the day, I thought, people often say that doing so (scattering salt) in school would force spirits to emerge, and the reason for the poisoning is unclear; I always felt there was a link to spirits and what not..."

Naru's pale fingers lightly rapped the table.

"If spirits are involved in this incident, do you have any hypothesis about the cause?"

Yasuhara's group tilted their heads in thought.

"I don't know."

"Really? Sorry to trouble you then."

Naru nodded gently towards Yasuhara.

"On a separate note, I have a question for student council president Yasuhara."

"Yes."

"When did you first notice the strange things happening here?"

Yasuhara paused slightly to think.

"I started thinking 'there is definitely something wrong here' first with the mass absenteeism. Only... yes, I had started feeling something was amiss around the period of the cultural festival."

"The details are?"

"Because the number of weird rumors increased. Since autumn, the student grapevine has reported nothing but strange tales. Here and there someone saw a ghost or something; I heard these stories, and started feeling uneasy."

Yasuhara looked very serious.

"As there was preparation work to do for the cultural festival, everyone would remain in school until late. That is, everyone suddenly became very reluctant to stay back. The change in the girls' (behavioral) tendencies was especially acute. Normally they would loiter around even if they had nothing on. I felt that was a little strange."

Naru nodded.

"What about the series of fires that happened before the mass absenteeism. What do you feel about that?"

"I can't recall the exact date; the first fire was around the middle of October. At first I thought it was started by some mischievous fellow or other who used fire carelessly. Then 10 days later there was another fire. At that time the teachers were getting a little nervous, the perpetrator was still unknown. And then the next... "

"12 days later?"

"Yes. To call it an accident would be too strange, and there were those who said it was not arson. The teachers had apparently increased their guard, but 12 days later the fire still happened. Although the teachers had diligently patrolled (the school), they still could not identify the perpetrator."

"And there was yet another fire 12 days later?"

"Yes. Then they even used the special locks boys’ schools use, although now they no longer bother. But still there was a fire. At that time the mass absenteeism incident happened; deep down I felt that it would be very weird if it was actually arson."

"And from then on there was a 12 day cycle?"

"Yes. Always on the morning of the 12th day."

"Locks?"

"It is locked."

"When will the next fire be?"

"The last time was on the 11th, so this time it should be on the 23rd. That's 2 days from now."

Naru was deep in thought. He tapped his ball point pen on the table and quickly looked up.

"Lastly..." As he said that, he looked at the group, and asked them about the strange rumors. After listening to their last incredible story, Naru shut his notebook and rose.

"Can you let me see your classroom?"

"Yes, please."

# 6

With Yasuhara's group leading the way, we made our way to that classroom - 3-1.

The classroom was located at the first floor of the West Block. Ryokuryou High School's compound is shaped like the character “コ”, to the north is the gymnasium; the staff rooms and student canteen are adjacent to each other in the North Block; turning a corner is the East Block consisting special classrooms; turning another corner is the South Block with normal classrooms. A turn away from the South Block is the West Block. It is a 3 level facility with only classrooms.

Once the door opened, a weak odor slammed into my senses. It was a hateful stench, like the smell of something rotten.

Yasuhara entered the classroom, and turned to look at us.

"I practically can't smell the stench anymore, what about you guys?"

Naru nodded.

"And it's not a very strong smell, but there definitely is an odor."

Bou-san opened the classroom's windows.

"Even after opening the windows, the stench does not dissipate."

Squinting, Naru scanned the room. Touching each table, he moved around the room.

"There is no place where the stench is particularly strong."

Yasuhara nodded.

"It is like that. Although we have carefully searched for the source of the stench, the whole classroom stinks."

Naru nodded, and then he suddenly stood still. He turned to look towards

Yasuhara's group surrounding the door.

"Has anything strange ever happened here?"

"Strange things?"

Yasuhara tilted his head. Naru's expression was severe.

"Like summoning, this type of thing."

Naru studied everyone's faces; the crowd started murmuring.

"Isn't he talking about Worikiri-sama?"

"That is..."

Addressing the various softly squabbling voices, Naru said, "What is it?"

Yasuhara represented the crowd to reply.

"Recently... That is to say, from the start of the second semester, Worikiri-sama has been popular. Is that it?"

With that last line was directed to the girls behind him.

The girl nodded nervously.

"Not just our class, it is popular throughout the school - Worikiri-sama, Gongen-sama and what not."

Worikiri-sama...?

"What is that?"

Although I directed my question at Bou-san, he turned to look at the girls.

"I have it with me, it has not been used." a girl piped up. She retrieved a piece of paper from her desk.

"This."

Ah!

On the paper were the Fifty Sounds. This is... Kokkuri-san...

Bou-san appeared to think so too.

"Isn't this Kokkuri-san?"

The girls went into an uproar. The girl who handed us the paper looked at us, highly dissatisfied.

"As if. Your supposed Kokkuri-san is summoning a fox, right? At the center there is an illustration of a Torii... I've heard that Kokkuri-san is very dangerous, and shouldn't be done casually. For this, look."

She pointed to the strange symbol in the center of the page. There were words arranged into a circle with the words "Yes" and "No" on either side. The repeated word "鬼(Oni; Demon)" arranged in a circle and the checkered pattern within left a strange impression.

"Worikiri-sama is summoning a god. It is very accurate in predicting love matches *etc.* Gongen-sama is..."

While she spoke, Bou-san snatched the paper without warning.

"Watch it!"

"How does Gongen-sama appear?"

Bou-san had crushed the piece of paper into a ball.

"Gongen-sama is a summoned god. Because it is a god, it can help us solve problems etc..."

Bou-san threw the paper ball. It hit the wall before dropping into the rubbish bin.

"What? Is there a problem?!"

The girl looked uneasily at Bou-san.

"Gongen-sama. Tarou-san. Hitofude-sama. Cupid-san. They are all aliases for Kokkuri-san."

"Eh!"

The exclamations came not just from the girl who handed us the paper.

"What you were doing was well and truly Kokkuri-san. It is the same thing regardless of what you name it. You casually summoned spirits, and treated them as toys."

"How could it..."

Bou-san looked furious.

"Even the uninitiated is capable of summoning. Summoning a spirit can be done by anybody, but to send a spirit back needs practice. Don't do it anymore."

"But... everyone says that if it is Worikiri-sama then it isn't frightening, and it does not matter..."

"That's bullshit. It's because you all do this type of stupid thing that these strange disturbances occur!"

Seeing Bou-san's face, the girls were immediately dejected.

"Really, here and there is all like this. In the class where the black dog appeared, there were also people playing this type of sick games. They probably summoned a low level wondering spirit. The mass poisoning must have been the fault of something similar."

"But! Worikiri-sama is very popular throughout the school!"

"Goodness... This fellow is really lucky, the school building has yet to collapse."

The girls lowered their heads.

Naru interrupted.

"You said it is very popular. How high is its popularity?"

The girls made eye contact with each other.

"The truth is that in school, everyone has been doing it."

"Amongst those present here is there anyone who has not done it?"

Including Yasuhara, not a single person raised his hand.

# 7

At this time we spread out and visited various classrooms, getting hold of any remaining students, and asked if and how many times they have done Kokkuri-san.

The main aim of the investigation was to determine the popularity; the proportion of students who have done it; estimate the frequency of the practice. The investigation was more or less complete before sundown, so we returned to the meeting room for tea.

As the meeting room did not have any facilities, Yasuhara brought utensils for making coffee from the student council room. After using an ancient heating plate to boil water, I added the instant coffee. I scrubbed the old fashioned western styled enamel tea cup, and appreciated the retro feel. It must have been used through many generations of student councils.

"How is it?"

After serving the coffee to everyone, Yasuhara seated himself. Then he surveyed us.

Leaning on the chair's back, Bou-san stared at his pile of notes, sighed a huge sigh before placing them on the table.

"This thing is huge, god help us."

"Is it very serious?"

Bou-san nodded his head, frustrated.

"All the students in the school are doing Kokkuri-san."

His sight fell on the pile of notes.

Those were the results of the investigation done with the help of Yasuhara and his group. Of all the students, more than 90% have done Kokkuri-san at least

once, and since September, most of them have done it every break time.

In November and December, before the strange incidents started the volume was still low. Despite this, with continued repetition, who knows how many times spirits have been successfully summoned in the school?

"... is the fault of the spirits that were summoned. Exactly how many spirits are there wondering in the school? Maybe not just thousands, maybe tens of thousands."

Bou-san let out another huge sigh and turned to Naru.

"I say, Naru-chan, are you really serious?"

Naru, also looking frustrated, stared out of the window, and made no reply.

"I say, why don't we just give up and leave. In any case it is the responsibility of the students, so they should just exorcise the spirits themselves and the case would be closed." - said like a child throwing a tantrum.

"I can't stand it. Doing Kokkuri-san and the type would call out some unmanageable spirits."

Yasuhara said "relax, relax," to sooth.

"I understand your feelings. Please."

"Right-o. I'll teach you the ways of exorcism, and you will do it."

"That..."

Yasuhara's face was troubled. I chided Bou-san, saying, "That won't do, monk! The principal has asked a favor of us."

"For me, I dislike this school's principal."

"Ah, so you're being difficult because you were bullied by Matsuyama."

"Shut up..."

I ruffled Bou-san's hair.

"Poor Bou-san. Your pure soul has been hurt."

"Exactly. To be so blatantly treated as a conman; although that does happen quite often. It's really a difficult job to be a psychic power user."

Bou-san pretended to cry.

"If that's the case, this will do. Collect all the various wondering spirits and have them concentrate on Matsuyama, that'd be fun."

"Oh, not a bad idea."

En, the moment Matsuyama is mentioned, Bou-san pays attention.

"I'm really sorry that Matsuyama is that sort of fellow."

No, that's not something you need to apologize for, Yasuhara.

"From the students' perspective, issues involving that fellow are completely ignored. Everyone tries not to have anything to do with him, because it's not like he'd listen to the opinions of others. It is the students who are more mature in having to tolerate him instead."

I can't help feeling Yasuhara said some incredible words...

Bou-san raised his head.

"Yasuhara-kun, are you all right?"

"What?"

"That is, with you helping us at our request? Did Matsuyama say anything to you?"

"No worries. Because my grades are good." - completely unmockingly, Yasuhara said that smiling.

"In the past he has said a lot. I'm not sure when, I wrote that my goal was to enter the Literature and Economics Department, he suddenly stopped criticizing me. People who abuse their power are weak in the face of power."

So it was like this.

Uncovering the truth, Bou-san and I were impressed. I don't know if Naru was listening, he was staring motionlessly out of the window.

"What's up? Still thinking of something deep?"

Naru remained deep in thought.

"...yeah. It's not like there's any deep, I'm just a little concerned."

"Concerned? What about?"

"As Matsuyama mentioned, the Japan of today appears to have popularized the occult."

"So it appears. So what?"

"Within Japan, the schools where Kokkuri-san is popular, how many do you think there are?"

So it is. "Why would such strange things only always happen in Ryokuryou High School?" is probably what he is trying to say.

"I understand what you are saying, but don't you think the volume here is exceptional?"

Hearing Bou-san's words, Naru's expression became even more complicated.

"Untrained people do not always succeed in summoning a spirit even if they try. In other words, the number of successes is very low. Is this school a special school for psychics? Even then, I don't believe that the situation would progress so smoothly."

"Perhaps."

"Furthermore, there is the current situation. Even if all the strange stories are all simple lies, what about the child in the LL classroom? The black dog? The fires? We are clear that playing Kokkuri-san will summon wondering spirits, and amongst these spirits there some that are powerful, and incidents where they cause harm is not unknown. But, if this is the case, the numbers are also abnormal."

"That..."

I said. I wanted to ask Bou-san some basic questions. In these scenarios, Naru is basically useless. (Note: even if I asked he would not answer...) "Would Kokkuri-san really summon spirits?"

"That should be, if it was a psychic."

"It would not happen with non psychics?"

"No. To start, that's too arbitrary."

"To tell the truth... I have done Kokkuri-san before."

"Heh. Even Mai can do such bored things."

"It's what you call the ignorance of youth. Kokkuri-san was very popular in Junior High. And then, that time the spirit came... or rather, the 10 yen coin moved, and really correctly predicted a lot of things. How would you explain that?"

"En... how should I put it..."

Bou-san looked at Naru; Naru shrugged.

"Mai, try placing your finger on the table. Like when playing Kokkuri-san."

I placed my finger on a point on the table.

"Your finger is shaking. Don't move."

I did not deliberately make my finger tremor. But looking at my own fingertip, my hand was indeed shaking, albeit slightly.

"Even if you say that..."

Even if I tried to be still I could not stop.

"Get it yet?"

"Huh?"

"The human body is just like that."

Ah, it is.

"When there are many people doing that together, under the influence of each person's shaking, the coin moved. Kokkuri-san and the Ouija Board (note: Ouija Board - used in communicating or summoning spirits as a divining or prophetic board, similar to the Japanese Kokkuri. Using the Latin letters and numbers, Yes/No etc on the board, the planchette would move under the direction of spirits, or spell out some deep message.) etc... the theory behind these are all similar. Everyone is moving unconsciously. Because the movement is unconscious that's why the resulting movement is unexpected."

"En."

Once I knew that I felt it was uninteresting.

"But, it really predicted a lot of things accurately - what was that?"

"Usually, people who think like that would also think, ‘it'd be great if the coin moved’, right?"

"Yes - it'd be more interesting if it moved."

"People would also think, ‘if the answers to the questions were correct, that would be more interesting.’ ‘How old is Mai this year?’ someone asks. Everyone knows the answer. 16 years. Subconsciously everyone is thinking, ‘if it moved to 1, then 6, it'd be incredible’, this hope within the players' subconscious caused the coin to move. And so it moves to 16."

"It also predicted something that only I knew."

"Like?"

"It predicted the current contents of my pocket."

"En. That was due to everyone's subconscious inference. The contents of a girl's pocket: handkerchief, comb, mirror... everyone's expectations are all different. All the participants are thinking on their feet. An item starting with "ki" - key holder (キーホルダー)? Then it follows to move to ‘ー’ (‘i’ sound). It would finally make up the word 'key holder'."

"Exactly."

Unbelievable.

I took the key holder out of my pocket.

"Idiot. It has been making noise from the start."

"Ah, is that so?"

"When playing this sort of game, there will appear answers that are right simply because it is common sense, and answers that are wrong. What is interesting here is the human mentality. For example, I ask ‘what is the name of Bou-san's mother’. And the answer that appears is ‘Ayako’... Bou-san, the answer is?"

"It is Masayo."

"Didn't get it right. Furthermore, because somewhere in the human mind, we think that it'd be more interesting if it got it right, he would carelessly say it. 'Although it didn't get it right, I do know someone called Ayako. How would it know that?'"

"Ah, so that's how it is..."

"If the answer was 'Ayayo', although it is wrong, but only the 'yo' was right; or if it was 'Masako', the 'Masa' alone would do it. If we are asking if it got the right answer, in this situation, by right neither of them should pass. But humans would incredibly have the feeling that it 'got it right'. Furthermore, even if it was completely wrong, one would think 'ah, as expected, it was wrong'. Because one would be surprised if it were right, that would leave a lasting impression on anyone. In a real experiment, when asked about 24 questions, only 3 were answered correctly, and these were not even strictly accurate answers."

"Listening to what you say, that might be the case..."

I think I felt like that when I was playing.

Bou-san looked suspiciously at Naru.

"What?"

"After listening to your speech, based on what you say, you don't believe in Kokkuri-san."

"Perhaps... Personally I don't believe in Kokkuri-san."

"Eh?! Is that so?"

"Why do you say so..."

"Everyone thinks that spirits are all knowing. Like, Mai's future, Bou-san's thoughts, the object hidden secretly in my pocket, everyone thinks that spirits would know these things as a matter of course, but is that really the case?"

"Ah," Bou-san and I said simultaneously.

"If Mai dies and turns into a spirit, do you believe you would know these things?"

"No."

"Exactly. I personally think so too. Basically the only things that spirits know more than man have got to do with 'death' and 'the world after death'."

En... So it was like this... only with things associated with 'death'; it's not something one would understand without experiencing it firsthand.

"So, unlike Bou-san, I think Kokkuri-san is only a harmless game."

Yasuhara, who had been listening quietly to us, interrupted.

"But, if there was a powerful psychic present? Wouldn't they really summon a spirit?"

Naru shrugged.

"It is possible. But this hypothetical psychic would be able to avoid evil spirits. He would be innately able to avoid summoning evil spirits."

If he could not, he would not be a psychic.

"That... is this not wrong."

"Anyway," Naru restlessly ruffled the mountain of notes.

"Summoning a spirit is similar to adjusting the frequency of a radio. ‘A crowd gathered and summoned spirits, resulting in the school being filled with wondering spirits’; on this opinion of Bou-san's I think there must be a certain degree of truth. If we exorcize but fail to find a cause, we can only assume that to be the cause. Until everyone gets here, we can only exorcize the spirits as they appear."

Naru sounded like he was deeply frustrated.

# Chapter 2 - Dance in the Shadows

## 1

When the second group consisting of Ayako and Lin-san arrived, it was already night.

When she arrived at the Meeting Room, Ayako exclaimed, “Don’t we have a guesthouse?!”

It was exactly such a situation. As this place is very far from Tokyo, we had asked the school to arrange for lodgings for us. Despite that, the school’s side only prepared a workroom…

Matsuzaki Ayako, 23 years old, is a self proclaimed Miko. For no apparent reason she is always full of confidence, but up till today, no one has yet to see her powers. There are some who say she is simply useless.

Ayako questioned me, “What in the world is this situation?”

“It can’t be helped. We are still good, with only 2 people in a room. The pair of us have 6 tatami’s space.”

Naru and the guys were to be pitied, with 3 persons squeezing into a space of 6 tatamis; when John comes the next day it’d be 4 people sleeping together.

“How dare they not even have heating?” Ayako grumbled on.

“That, too, can’t be helped. Or should be forget it and just go home?”

When she heard me say that, Ayako refused to look at me.

Naru, wearing an expression that said “this has nothing to do with me”, was discussing something with Lin-san.

Lin-san: real name unclear, age unknown. I've known him for nearly 10 months now, but I still don't know his name and age; all of this builds up Lin-san's image. Thinking about it carefully, Lin-san is a more mysterious person than Naru.

"Anyway the number of sightings is really too large and our equipment and resources are a little lacking." Naru said looking highly dissatisfied.

"Tomorrow we will have Hara-san do an inspection for spirits, and confirm the presence of the spirits. If there are spirits, we will have the Monk, Matsuzaki-san, and John conduct exorcisms. Lin-san and I will investigate the more suspicious locations. As for Mai…"

Saying that, he turned to face me.

"Basically, stay at the base and collate and organize the reports."

"Ye~es"

"But, if anything is discovered, you must report at once."

???

When the monk saw that I was flustered as I did not understand Naru's meaning, he continued.

"Aren't you the woman with the 6th sense?"

"Ah, am I?"

Now that he mentioned it there was that incident, when a random hunch was right. And they unexpectedly even say it is latent ESP. Xi~ xi~ xi~ (laughter)
"Naru-chan~ this fellow just won't do ~~"

Whatever. Have you forgotten? Look, I am very gentle.

"Forget it. It's nothing new that Mai is useless on the field. The last time was just a special case."

Ayako's tone was sarcastic.

"So, the truth is you are envious; just because you have never been useful."

Ayako's face was flushed with anger.

Looking at the parties glaring at each other, Yasuhara started smiling.

“I had always thought psychic users etc are much darker and deeper people.”

“Our group here is special. Oh yes, Yasuhara-kun, don’t you have to go home?”

“En, don’t judge me by my looks, I think I am capable of the basic chores and errands. Right now I am thinking of staying to help out.” Yasuhara said, smiling.

The monk’s expression turned pathetic. Perhaps he was imagining a scenario of 5 men squeezed into 6 tatamis.

“Please don’t worry; I have borrowed a sleeping bag.”

En~ Surprisingly, Yasuhara is the tough type.

“Yasuhara-kun.” Naru’s tone was severe. “I really appreciate your offer to stay back to help, but it is better if you did not stay over. It is very dangerous.”

“Definitely, if you feel I am getting in your way, please tell me, and I will go home.” Yasuhara said, smiling widely.

I can’t help feeling he’s a very energetic person. En, I have turned into a fan of Yasuhara’s.

A glimpse of a smile appeared on Naru’s lips.

“If that’s the case, then please provide us with your help. Do you have confidence in your strength?”

“Please leave it to me.”

Naru nodded, and then said, “then, Lin and Mai, go and move the equipment.”

Yes~.

One by one we went to the van parked in the school’s car park to collect the equipment.

“LL classroom, 2-4, 3-1, the Locker Room, the Music Preparation Room – set up cameras in these 5 locations. Place microphones in the other places where the other strange stories were reported.”

We followed Naru’s instructions and moved the equipment to their designated locations and set up. Running back and forth between the car park and the

school compound, Yasuhara was dazzled.

“It’s really incredible. The modern day psychic makes use of this type of equipment!”

Yasuhara and I went to the Chemistry Lab where footsteps were heard and installed a microphone.

“It’s only our group that is special.”

I smiled bitterly. There was nothing to be done besides forcing a smile.

“To tell the truth, I had thought that supposed psychics would look and feel more dangerous, they would raise their hands and chant incantations.”

“There are also people who do that. But at least, Naru is not a psychic.”

“Is that so?”

Yasuhara looked very shocked.

“That is what he says himself. He says he’s just a ghost hunter.”

“Ah, if that’s the case I get it.”

My hand that was installing the recorder paused.

“That’s rare… Normally one wouldn’t know this type of thing.”

Yasuhara’s expression was complicated.

“Because this previously became a topic of discussion…”

Topic of discussion?

“Sakauchi, not long after enrolment he wrote this in the survey of his aspirations. He said he wished to become a ghost hunter in the future. But that might have been only written as a joke.”

“Sakauchi… was the male student who died in summer…?”

“Yes. According to what I know, his was the first death of a student since the founding of this school. There was a period when everyone was discussing that incident.”

Yasuhara looked pained.

“I can’t help feeling… we shouldn’t keep quiet. We pass each other in the same school, spend half the day in the same space, and might have unknowingly brushed pass each other in some corridor. If it was fated, we might have become friends. That’s what I think.”

“Yeah.”

Even if he was joking, he was still the boy who wanted to become a ghost hunter. If he had met us, what would he have said?

“Really? He was a boy who was interested in this sort of things.” Seeing that I was looking a little dejected, Yasuhara said that encouragingly.

“Ok. Where should we go next, Captain?” Yasuhara lifted the stand up.

“It is, ‘the Gym Storeroom with Sound of the Cat’s Mewing’. Yasuhara-kun, don’t call me ‘Captain’ or whatever.”

“For that, if you want me to be less formal then I shan’t call you that. The real Taniyama-san should be a livelier person.”

Oh oh, I’ve been seen through.

“If Yasuhara-kun does not do so too then I shan’t continue. Because I am younger.”

“For me, I really hate this type of thing. I dislike the society which differentiates between social classes.”

“Ah, me too.”

“We really have quite a lot in common, Captain.”

“Yes, little brother. Before we get scolded by that super narcissistic big boss, let’s go to the next location.”

“Let’s do that.”

In the school filled with wild rumors, Yasuhara and I walked briskly, smiling.

# 2

The first night was spent setting up equipment.

Night vision cameras, temperature recorders, microphones etc; we set them up in order at the locations of the strange rumors and at places where spirits were more frequently seen. Anyway, because we did not have enough cable (I refer to extensions needed by the equipment) to cover the entire school compound, the machines were left at the various locations to record pictures and sounds, so we had no choice but to retrieve them one by one to examine them in the meeting room. As usual, the preparation work was very troublesome; the post set-up maintenance was also a chore; I was quickly sick of it.

By the time we finished the work and turned in, it was about midnight, 3am.

Ayako, who did not help us, had turned in much earlier and was already snuggled in blankets in the workroom. Even when I entered the room, she did not stir. Despite that, I changed quietly and dived beneath the cold sheets.

After that, I had an inconceivable dream.

I was walking in the school at night.

Dark classrooms; dark corridors. There was not a soul in sight; it was a completely silent school compound. I did not know where I was. It was pitch black.

I felt there was something and studied my surroundings. I noticed a door in front of me.

Instinctively, I opened the door. A cool breeze blew. This was the roof.

Scanning the roof, I saw a figure at one side.

“Who’s there?”

I put together the questioning words; he turned his head.

It was a male around my age. He was not tall, and looked vulnerable. He glanced at me with lifeless eyes; his line of sight returned at once to look away from the roof.

He grabbed the railing, and stared unmoving at the ground.

“What are you doing?”

I walked to his side and asked. He whispered in reply.

“I’m looking…”

To my “looking at what?” he did not reply. I followed his line of sight and looked. He continued to stare unmoving at the school compound. For some time, the two of us, together, stared at the school compound.

Dark, black windows. We could see something white floating within them.

“Ee?” I thought, as my eyes gazed at these things. White light. They easily passed through the windows and floated around. They were round, dragging a very long tail. They appeared weightless; the white lights looked like they were flowing.

Just as I thought that, white lights also appeared at the level beneath that. Looking over, they were also in the next level. They were in the next window and the window after that too. Turning to look behind, they were also on the field.

In an instant, the school was filled with spirits. Leaving a white tail of light, they flew all over the place. They were also all around me. It looked like it had been heavily.

“You are… looking at that?” I asked the silent boy who looked.

He nodded. A slight smile appeared at the corners of his lips.

“Are you not afraid?”

“I’m very happy.”

“Happy? About this type of thing?”

But those are spirits! To be happy about this type of scenery?

He glanced back at me with a satisfied smile.

“Extremely happy.”

But, those are…

Suddenly his expression was hidden by a dark shadow. He looked steadily at me, lips parting. Those steady eyes flashed a dark radiance.

He was smiling. The corners of his lips rose. It was a sinister smile.

“I’m extremely happy. There is no feeling better than this.”

Who are you?

Who exactly are you?

Suddenly I was awake.

I sat up, my surroundings were still dark. I could hear Ayako breathing softly.

I glanced at the watch next to my pillow. I had not even slept 10 minutes.

Ee? What in the world was that dream?

I tried to recall the boy’s face. It was a face I had never seen before. At the very least, it was not a person I know.

“How strange…”

I fluffed my pillow, and lay down once more. This time, my sleep was undisturbed.

# 3

Already exhausted by the previous night, we were rudely awakened by someone early in the morning.

Grumbling, I opened the door. Outside the door stood a few girls; they had heard of the psychics' arrival, and had run to ask for news before classes started.

It's not like I don't understand your feelings…

So I explained the situation to them. Yesterday was only preparing for the investigation; the official investigation would start today, so any exorcism would only begin after that.

After dismissing the dissatisfied group of girls, once again I snuggled beneath the sheets.

I was nearly asleep, when someone knocked on the door.

It was the 5 groups of students we saw the day before. Thanks to them, Ayako and I were well and truly roused.

The series of unfortunate events did not end there.

When I went to the equipment we set up yesterday, to retrieve the data collected, there was a large crowd of people gathered around. They grabbed hold of me and I was interrogated. Because it will get in the way of our investigations, could every one please keep their hands off the equipment – they need to be handled with care. There was no job harder than this.

Furthermore, in the crowd all dressed in uniforms, we outsiders were even more eye-catching. When we walked around to check on the equipment we would be stopped by curious students.

They all wanted to know even the smallest development. As Yasuhara had said, everyone in the school felt unsettled. There were conspicuous empty seats in the classes. The seats belonged to students who were sick due to the season, and

students who were too afraid to attend school. The school was completely lifeless. Students gathered in small groups, and spoke softly, as though at a funeral.

And, we would be fortunate to be stopped by the students. The real misfortune was to be spotted by Matsuyama. If we were seen by Matsuyama, he would make sarcastic comments. He would say a lot of words that would more than make my blood vessels burst, and leave wearing a self satisfied expression. Hn. Bastard.

Then that afternoon, Masako, who came with John in the third group, dropped the most dissatisfactory bombshell.

When John and Masako arrived, it was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

John Brown, 19 years old, is an Australia born exorcist. Unfortunately he learnt his Japanese in Kansai, and would inadvertently become the unfortunate target for teasing. His personality is very good, it's a small shame (?) that he's a psychic.

Hara Masako, 16 years old, is a spirit medium. She has been actively working as a medium since her childhood, and is a famous personality who has appeared on television. Although I'd like to comment on other aspects of her, I'll skip it now. She is, according to Naru, apparently very powerful.

After the pairs' arrival at the base and introduction to Yasuhara, who had came to help out after class, Naru explained the situation. I was at the side organizing the reports collected the day before and checking the data collected by Lin-san the previous night.

First Naru asked Masako, "Hara-san, what is the state of the school?"

Masako looked melancholy. Looking lost for words, she was hesitant for a while. With Naru's encouragement she finally spoke.

"I'm not… quite clear." She dropped the bomb.

In a split second we started clamoring.

"That can't be, Masako, that again?"

Masako ignored the monk's words.

"It's not like I can't see anything. I can feel their presence."

Appearing worried, the monk cradled his head in his hands. Ayako and John shook their heads, they were out of ideas. Then Naru's expression turned complicated.

In other words, this time we can't count on Masako.

Spare me a little.

Apparently, it takes some talent to be able to see spirits. For strong spirits with clear aims, even untalented people have been reported to be able to see them. But, for the normal spirit that quietly exists, one would need special talent to see it.

Of all the members gathered here only Masako has this sort of ability. That is to say, if we can't rely on Masako, we were as good as blind. It was really worrisome.

"… and their presence that you can feel?"

When the apparently very frustrated Naru said that, Masako showed a contrary expression.

"Normally, the spirits should be clearly seen, but here… It's like looking at a poorly tuned television channel. There is a great deal of static mixed inside… Do you get what I am saying?"

En, I'm not quite clear.

"I can feel the presence of spirits, and there are quite a lot of them. I also know where they are, but… exactly what kind of spirits they are, I'm not too clear. Although there are spirits that can be clearly seen that are present."

Masako said that and lowered her head.

"For me, I have never been good at communicating with wondering spirits. If it is a spirit that has a special connection to a person or a location, I usually have no problem…"

The monk sighed.

"Anyway… because these are spirits summoned through Kokkuri, it is to be expected they have no great connection to the school or to the students… And this happens again, Masako."

He glared maliciously at Masako.

Masako stared at the monk.

“This is only a special situation. This time it’s not like I can’t see or feel them at all!”

“Yes, yes,” the monk said, contracting his neck.

Masako suddenly slightly creased her brow.

“But there is a spirit that I feel particularly strongly here…”

“What kind of spirit is it?” Naru asked. Masako squinted, as though looking at a distance.

“It is a male, about my age…” A male…about Masako’s… about my age…?

“I can see that male very clearly. I can feel a very strong emotion. That male… perhaps something happened in this school that saddened him. He is currently trapped within the school.”

That… is not it…

With her eyes closed, Masako tilted her head.

“It is clearly not nearby, but its presence is that strong… I believe it must be the spirit of someone who committed suicide. And it happened not long ago.”

It is Sakauchi-kun… In other words, he is currently haunting the school…

My head suddenly felt pleasantly cool.

Last night’s dream. The boy on the roof. That person… who was he?

Naru opened his notebook and took out a newspaper clipping.

“That spirit, is it this person?”

Masako took the clipping and looked at it. Coincidentally Masako was standing right next to me, and I could see the contents of the clipping by just stretching my neck. It was an article about a first year student’s suicide in a certain school. There was a photograph of the student on it.

I suddenly felt faint. That was… that photograph was…

Masako nodded.

“It is this person. So his name was Sakauchi…”

Naru retrieved the clipping from Masako and returned it to its original location and said, “this… hate for the school… is true.”

Naru looked like he was muttering to himself. Then he immediately turned to Lin-san, “Lin, what was the situation last night?”

The aforementioned Lin-san took down his headphones.

“There are some locations where the temperature was abnormal. 3-1, 2-4 and the LL classroom had especially low temperatures.”

3-1 was Yasuhara’s classroom where the mass poisoning occurred.

2-4 was the classroom where the black dog appeared.

“There is nothing abnormal with the visuals; the microphones recorded sounds in 3 locations. Distinctly, they are the Art Preparation Room, 2-4 classroom, and the Gym Storeroom.”

Naru knocked the table with a thump.

“So it is like this, we get a response on the very first day.”

When was that incident… Naru had said before “Spirits are very shy.” Spirits dislike outsiders. If there are outsiders, they would temporarily go into hiding.

However we got a response on the very first day. If that’s the case then…

Naru swept a glance over all of us.

“Commence exorcism with the 5 aforementioned locations as the core. Hara-san, please walk around the school and check the locations where there are spirits. Matsuzaki-san, please accompany Hara-san, and conduct exorcisms to the best of your abilities.”

“Ok.”

Ayako and Masako rose. Naru called after Ayako, saying, “It’d be better if you don’t look down on the spirits in this place; please be more careful.

“Mai will keep watch over this place, and actively manage the communications. Monk and John,” Naru looked at the pair as he said that.

“First, proceed to the 5 locations which had activity last night and conduct exorcisms there. After that go to locations pointed out by Hara-san.”

“Yeah.”

“Yes.”

The pair replied and rose from their seats.

“Lin and I will continue to investigate suspicious locations. Yasuhara-kun, please help us. Mai,”

“Yes!”

In response to my enthusiastic reply, Naru shot a cold look at me.

“Do not be lazy and fall asleep.”

Yes~

# 4

In the school where lessons continued as though nothing had happened, everyone set out.

I was the only one who stayed in the Meeting Room. To be left alone was a little lonely, and perhaps a little scary; somehow I could not calm down. Quietly fuming, I organized the reports we collected the day before.

The strange stories and their locations. The contents of eye-witness reports. I used a very large cardboard and sorted them by type, and could not help yawning.

Ah… that won't do. I'm sleepy. Last night I stayed up so late, and also did physically demanding work. And now I'm so bored… I must not sleep. I have to be more stimulated. If I was to be caught napping by Naru, I wouldn't know what he'd say.

I was struck with a strong bout of sleepiness.

For no reason, my throat felt very dry. I craved for a cold drink.

I recalled there was a vending machine at the end of the building…

I stood up and walked to the corridor.

I gazed blankly at my surroundings.

The corridor was wide and empty. Was it because I was spacing out, or because the sky was darkening, the vision in front of me was a strange and flat scene. Weak sunlight permeated the windows at the side of the corridor. The far end of the corridor was shrouded in mysterious darkness. It was covered by a dull black color; it looked like only there, dusk had already fallen. In the midst of the darkness, there was something white moving.

"… …?"

The white was the face. Only the face was visible as he wore black colored clothes.

What the… it was actually Naru. Don't scare me like that.

Naru walked slowly towards me. As though in sync with his footsteps, the corridor gradually darkened. In the opaque blackness, only Naru's silhouette could be seen clearly.

"What's up?"

Did anything happen?

Naru smiled. A slight smile. Then the smile immediately tensed.

"This place is very dangerous… Mai, you'd better not remain here."

"How can it be?"

"It's true. There are spirits floating all around here."

"Are there that many?"

I recalled the previous night's dream: spirits blanketing the school like snow.

"Yes. Although everyone is conducting exorcisms, there is practically no effect." He said, frowning slightly. Then, "Look."

He extended his pale fingers and pointed to the floor. Following his fingers, I looked at the pitch black floor.

"Ai…?"

When I regained my focus, I found that the floor had turned transparent.

Beside my foot, it was like white lines had been drawn on the black floor, like the square outline of ceramic tiles. Beneath that, through the transparent floor, the second floor's corridor was visible. There, too, was shrouded in darkness. The floor there was also transparent, and I could see the first floor corridor beneath it.

"Ai?!"

I nearly fell down on my bottom. It felt like being suspended high in the air. If it wasn't for Naru's hand holding me, I might have plummeted straight down.

“It’s nothing, calm down a little.”

“What has it changed into now?”

I scanned my surroundings. The sky was black. The school which was originally grey was now black. Contrastingly, the things that were originally black had changed into white - the windows of the next school building, the trees that were bare due to winter.

The floor and the walls everywhere had turned transparent. Just like the negatives of photographs stacked together. The only people remaining in this negative world were Naru and I.

“Hey, this is…”

Naru interrupted my speech.

“Look closely. There are a lot of spirits hovering.”

I looked beside my foot. A dark, empty space. The lines of the floor, the lines of the walls, and the outlines of the buildings – only these were white. Like it was drawn with white on black paper – a transparent school compound. Beneath my feet it was transparent - the second floor, first floor, corridors, classrooms.

Over there, floated translucent objects that gave off a wan glow. They looked just like spirits illustrated in books with their white tails, and moved like they were flowing. 10, 20… they were countless. In the second floor right in front of me, there were 8 of them.

“So many… Are they all spirits?”

“That’s right. Look…”

Naru raised his hand and pointed towards the window. Opposite the white outline that remained of the wall was the building containing the Gymnasium. The Gymnasium, too, had turned transparent leaving only a white outline.

At the front of the Gymnasium was a small room. That was the Locker Room. There were 2 figures inside. It was Masako and Ayako.

Masako approached a huge spirit next to some storage shelves and stopped. That spirit looked larger and blacker than the other spirits.

Masako pointed at that spirit, and Ayako started brandishing her jade rosary. The pale black spirit floated weightlessly to escape, and floated out of the window. Neither Masako nor Ayako noticed any of these.

“How could that be?”

“It escaped. It escaped to somewhere else… look.”

The escaped spirit continued flying, and escaped to the East Block we were currently in. It floated to a small room at the end of the second floor, and closed in on a white spirit straying in a corner. That was the Broadcast Room…

The large black spirit and the smaller, rounder white spirit circled each other. Their tails became intertwined. Soon, the smaller spirit was engulfed by the larger one. It felt like the larger spirit grew a little larger, and a little blacker.

“How disgusting…”

“Yeah. It’s a really nasty sight: spirits devouring other spirits. That’s why I said… this place is very dangerous.”

“But…”

“Just like that they grow… then…”

Naru’s fingers descended as he pointed beneath his feet. Through the transparent floor, I looked at the room in the first floor. There were spirits in that room too. While I called them spirits, perhaps they are more suitably called will-o’-the-wisps. Quite a distance from my feet, was a darkening, swamp-like patch of an ominous color. And it was immense. It was like a huge pit had opened in the center of the room.

“That is evil… do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Looking at the color alone would make your skin crawl. It had an extremely evil will.

I stared, unmoving, at the clump of black. The white spirits floating around the school – some of them went beside the black will-o’-the-wisp. The will-o’-the-wisp pulsated rhythmically like a heart. The burning flames stretched out, ensnaring the smaller spirits, engulfing them. It was just like a carnivorous plant

trapping weaker insects and devouring them.

“You had better go back.” Naru said to me.

“But, I’m unable to do it, to return by myself.”

Naru looked at me worriedly.

“Then you need someone to teach you to reverse the spell.”

“Is someone like me capable of doing it?”

“If it is a weaker person… you have to be more cautious, and not go near to dangerous places.”

“Okay.”

I looked about my feet. The never-ending strange scenery. Black, large will-o’-the-wisps were dangerous. I confirmed its locations. In the first floor of this building there were 2. In the East Block there were 5. The South Block had 4. When I was looking at these, the area beside my feet grew dimmer. The previously visible scenery beneath gradually grew fainter, color returned to the ground beneath me. Slowly the floor came back into sight.

“… …?”

The floor. Brown colored plastic tiles. There was flooring everywhere.

“Mai!”

Ah!

I raised my head and saw Naru. He looked severe.

“If you are tired go and sleep. Your stumbling is a hinderance.”

“How fierce you are, all of a sudden.”

“… …? Are you awake?”

He looked at me suspiciously. Am I awake? I definitely am…

Ha—

I looked around me.

The meeting room. The long table. The messed up pile of papers in front of me.

The floor plans of the school stuck on the white board. And in the doorway was Naru, staring at me.

… … … …

“I’m sorry. I was spacing out over here.”

Crap… I’m in trouble.

“How is the organizing going?”

“Not done yet.”

“Has there been any communication from the others?”

“I think there should not have been any.”

“You think?”

Naru looked at me coldly.

“Are you trying to help us? Or are you trying to get in our way?”

This… this fellow –

But for me, the lazy investigator who was caught napping, there was no possible reply.

# 5

John and the monk returned immediately after Naru left the Meeting Room.

“How is it?”

“Who knows? It wouldn’t be this tough if I knew.”

Really…

John also tilted his head. As he marked the school’s floor plan on the white board, he said, “For now, although I have said prayers as per Hara-san’s instructions, there does not seem to be any effect…”

Suddenly an image crossed my mind. John was scattering holy water. The pale white spirits left that place, and escaped to another location.

“Can’t say for certain, but maybe they escaped…”

“Ha?”

“Nothing. Ah, right. Hey, am I able to reverse spells?”

John and the monk looked at each other.

“Do you both think it’s impossible?”

“… a simpler one.”

After I finished, John said, “you should be able to do the very basic things, and there is the method of scattering salt and saying ‘In the name of the Lord, I order you, evil spirits, be gone.’ But is Mai-san a Christian?”

“No.”

“If that’s the case, maybe doing this will not work.”

“Is it…”

If it’s me it’s impossible… As expected.

“Why would you suddenly be like this?” The monk asked, disbelieving.

“Is it possible for me to be of a little use… something of that type…”

John and the monk exchanged a look once more.

“If we let Mai conduct exorcisms, don’t you feel we’ll all be doomed?”

F**k.

Just as I was about to loudly admonish the monk, he suddenly said to me, straightforwardly, “With the fingers on the inside, stack them together.”

… …?

“Like this.”

The monk showed me how he interlaced his fingers with the palms facing away and bent the fingers inwards to form a stack.

“Like this?”

“Then, place your index fingers and thumbs together vertically.”

It was like a position used by ninjas or something. And the fingers hurt quite a bit.

“This is the Seal of Acalanatha. Maintaining the proper position of the seal, say, ‘naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan’.”

“Ha?”

“Naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan.”

The monk wrote the words quickly on the whiteboard.

“Try practicing it. Say it three times continuously.”

“En… naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan…?”

“If, after chanting the incantation, the spirit does not disappear, do this.”

The monk released the seal, raised the index and middle finger of his right hand and held them in his other hand.

“Form the Sword Seal, concentrate.”

“Okay. Like this?”

I tried copying the monk's actions.

"Not bad. This is the simplest one. Don't accidentally bite your tongue in impatience."

"Yes~"

"Unlike Christianity, it works even with non-believers. Anyway, try your best."

Was that a dig at John? You really say a lot of redundant words…

"Ok. John, let's head to the next place. 'No Rain but Water Drips'…"

The monk retrieved and looked at a card I had compiled.

"The first floor's Printing Room."

The monk's finger searched for the location of the Printing Room on the floor plan on the whiteboard.

"There it is."

That place is…

I accidentally recalled the dream I just had.

Naru's voice in the dream. "That is evil." The ominously colored will-o'-the-wisp. The room it was in.

"You can't go there."

I could not help blurting out.

"Eh?"

The monk and John turned back to look at me. Flustered, I said, "Leave that place alone for now. Could you go to the Music Preparation Room first?"

Although the monk and looked flabbergasted, he silently accepted the card I handed out.

"'The Music Preparation Room Where Noises are Heard'? John, let's go."

"Yes."

# 6

While I verified the (disappearing) footsteps of the pair, I tilted my head in thought.

Why did I say something like that…? That was just a dream. It had no special meaning. It shouldn't have… What happened in the Printing Room was that water would frequently drip down and create puddles everywhere. It was only an incident of this level; nothing that could be considered "sinister" had happened.

But…

When I could not help starting to ponder, the Meeting Room's door was opened, and Yasuhara appeared.

He was ordered around by Naru, and had run all over the place moving equipment.

"Is the job done?"

"Yes. If you are referring to the errands I was assigned." Yasuhara said, beaming.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Ah, I'll make it."

"No need, it's always been my job to make the coffee."

"If that's the case then I really should make the coffee. Won't you get bored doing the work that you always do?"

Wa. Sorry to trouble you~

"About that, Taniyama-san… was the cause as we expected – the Kokkuri?"

"It looks like it."

"Hu… It's really unfair. Kokkuri and the type, they are clearly games that are

played everywhere.”

“That’s even though Naru also said something like that.”

“It appears to be very popular in the middle school my little sister attends. But this type of strange things only happens in our school.”

Yeah yeah.

“But the Kokkuri popular in this school is very strange. It’s called Worikiri-sama right?”

“Is it? Although I don’t know the details, it looks like it is very complicated with this and that. That’s despite saying this place really gives one a strange feeling.”

“Complicated?”

“Yes. Unlike regular Kokkuri, it appears to have various rules. For example, the paper cannot be used more than once.”

“He~ It’s really strange.”

“The used paper must be disposed at the shrine or something. And there is the chanting of incantations…”

“Worikiri-sama, Worikiri-sama… like this?”

“It’s not like that. How was it done…? I’ve only heard it a few times myself. ‘Oh~Worikirittenantara’ or something.”

“What was that, ah, this?”

I immediately started feeling strange.

“As expected was it very strange? Perhaps this method of doing it only done in our school.”

“I always thought it was weird; Kokkuri and what not… where did everyone first learn of this method?”

Yasuhara tilted his head.

“You’ve got a point. Perhaps someone heard it somewhere… It might be interesting to investigate this. ‘From whom did you learn how to play Worikiri-sama?’ or something similar. There must have been someone who invented it.”

“And there are people still playing the normal Kokkuri?”

“There probably aren’t that many. About autumn everyone was homogeneously playing Worikiri-sama. There were people casually calling Worikiri-sama ‘Kokkuri-san’, ‘Cupid-san’ etc right from the start. That, isn’t there a saying that Kokkuri-san would cause haunting? So nobody still plays that anymore. Then someone said that Worikiri-sama would not cause haunting, and the steps are very complicated. And they said that if you followed the rules it would be completely safe.”

“So that’s why you played?”

“My curiosity is very strong. I would always want to try it out once.”

“I can understand that… On hindsight, the volume is really exaggerated. Why would it be so popular?”

“If we analyze the reasons for its popularity you wouldn’t have so much trouble. Perhaps it’s like this: maybe it’s because the steps are very unusual. Look, didn’t you see those papers? That alone is already a little strange. People think it is a novelty.”

“Is it?”

Yasuhara’s expression turned slightly more serious.

“Although there are other explanations, ‘suppressed students looking to vent their stress’ and the type, this type of explanations are not convincing; because it would grow into a problem of some sort.”

“Yasuhara-kun… I can’t help feeling you are very knowledgeable.”

“Yes. I’ve been called a little old man by others. As for my nickname, it is ‘Echigo-ya’.”

“Eh… Echigo-ya?”

“Yes. They say I have the image of a kindly old man, but they can’t tell what I’m really thinking of deep down.”

Perhaps it’s like that… deep inside…

“It’s today.” Yasuhara said suddenly.

“Eh?”

“The twelfth day. Tonight. More accurately tomorrow morning. There will be another fire in the Locker Room.”

He said it like it was an inevitable event.

I suddenly thought of the dream I had.

“Perhaps… not in the Locker Room.”

“Eh?” Yasuhara asked suspiciously.

Ah… not good…

I frantically waved my hands.

“That… there’s no profound meaning to it… I just suddenly felt that this time it could occur somewhere else… whatever. Like the Broadcast Room…”

There was no deeper meaning, because, it was just a dream. Firstly, I don’t even know if Masako and Ayako ever really visited the Locker Room. Furthermore, the monk and John had exorcised basically all the places where incidents have happened that were reported on the news.

“Are you a person with sixth sense?”

“That’s why I say, ah…”

This is really troubling…

“I’ve already said this is nothing important. Only in the previous case my hunch was right. It’s not like being able to detect spirits or anything similar…”

It’s not… I think it’s not… maybe…

# 7

The sun had set, and the surroundings started to turn dark. The monk and John returned to the Meeting Room.

Once the monk entered the room he let out a whistle.

“Oh, Mai, in a world of your own with your boyfriend? How mature.”

Really. Who’s my boyfriend?!

“Yasuhara-kun is also very quick. Youth is great~: That, ah…

“Takigawa-san, that’s not fair. It was a rare opportunity for us to talk in depth.”

En!

Upon hearing Yasuhara’s clever retort, John’s head hit the whiteboard. The monk, too, stared at Yasuhara with a tic on his face.

“I wish you would be more considerate of the feelings of others.”

As though imparting a secret, the monk placed his hands on Yasuhara’s shoulders.

“Young man… Have a little chat with me.”

“Yes.”

“I understand your feelings, but you have to consider the situation and the location.”

“Ah, right. Then, next time I’ll try my best.”

That… that…

“You have to consider the atmosphere for this sort of thing…”

That… hey, hey?

Looking steadily at Yasuhara, the monk said, “Do you like Mai?”

“Yes I do.”

… …

“Ah, but I also like Shibuya-san. He is very beautiful!”

Gong. John’s head hit the whiteboard once more.

“But I like Takigawa-san even more *heart*”

The monk looked severely at Yasuhara from the corner of his eyes.

“Young man…”

“Yes?”

“You, you are teasing me?”

“Of course *heart*”

With a shout “ai”, the monk released his fist. In order to dodge the monk’s blow, Yasuhara escaped behind the table.

“Don’t make fun of adults!”

“That’s because you were thinking of making fun of children.”

Yeah, yeah…

Smiling, Yasuhara poured coffee for the pair of them.

“How is the work going?”

The monk looked like he had been asked a question he would rather not answer.

“I don’t feel like answering work related questions.”

“It’s not going well?”

In response to my question, the monk only shortened his neck. John made a mark on the Geography Room where the fluorescent light dropped during cleaning. He marked it with a sign “J”. It meant that the location had already been exorcised by John. While he continued marking other locations, he answered in place of the monk.

“The volume is too large.”

The floor plan of the school was on the whiteboard. Troublesome places were marked with numbers, and the places that have been exorcised were marked with red.

After a whole day, only one fifth was done.

“What’s the situation with Masako?”

This time, can we still not rely on Masako?

The monk sighed.

“Although she insists that while she can’t see it she can definitely feel it, I don’t know what is really going on.”

“Hey, hasn’t Naru said before that within Japan, Masako is first class? Would something like this happen to a first class medium?”

“Yeah…”

The monk groaned painfully.

“Masako is good at channeling spirits.”

“Channeling spirits?”

“Ah. She summons a spirit and lets it possess her body. Then she can make prophecies, and answer questions. What she does is not too different from Kokkuri.”

“Ah, television programs frequently broadcast that.”

“Apparently she has got a lot of it right. But…” The monk looked pained. “Naru has said before, ‘the only things spirits know have got to do with death’.”

Hmm.

“I have never doubted this before, but when Naru said that I thought that might be the case. For example, I let Masako summon my Grandpa’s spirit back from the dead. My Grandpa, possessing Masako, not only knows things that only my Grandpa and I would know, but can also answer my questions. ‘How will my luck in Love be?’ ‘It’s only so-so.’ That type of conversation.”

“Yeah.”

“The conversation between the spirit and myself is like that, but what really goes on?”

I...see. This is really difficult. John cut into the conversation.

“Some time ago I was asked to help write an article. There are researchers who say that there are 2 types of mediums.”

“2 types?”

“Yes. Real mediums and ESPers.”

The monk nodded.

“Ah, I’m not sure where but I have heard that before. It should be Professor Davis.”

“So you remember. What the Professor said, was, mediums need not have psychic powers.”

“Ha?”

I did not fully understand their conversation.

“That’s why… say; the medium can summon my Grandma’s spirit, right? Grandma’s spirit borrows the mediums’ body and says things that only Grandma and I would know. There are people who say, that my Grandma’s spirit need not necessarily have possessed the medium’s body.”

“? But didn’t the medium know of things that only John and his Grandma should know?”

“Yes. But, it might not be the spirit that tells the medium. The medium might have ESP… there’s a chance she's a psychometrist.”

“Psycho…? What is that?”

“Psychometrist. That is a person with psychometry. This ‘psychometry’ is the power to be able to sense the history or related events through an object. For example, you pick up a bag on the street. A psychometrist would be able to see the past and the future of the bag; what type of person the bag’s owner was, what he is doing now, what he will do after that.”

“Is it like that?” I asked, and John nodded.

“Yes. Exactly. Professor Davis himself is a psychometrist, that’s why he came up with that theory.”

“This Professor Davis, is he that person with psycho kinesis (PK)?”

“Yes. Professor Oliver Davis. He was a researcher in England’s SRP – Society of Psychical Research. Not only was he a talented psychometrist, he was also able to use PK. He is of a minority of psychics who is able to use both PK and ESP. Professor Davis had a brother named Eugene Davis, who was a medium. The professor had mentioned before that Eugene Davis was a pure medium. Although Eugene did not know German, if he summoned a German spirit he would speak German; if it was a Greek, he would speak Greek. Such occurrences are very rare. It should be impossible unless he was possessed by a spirit. However, amongst the mediums, there are some who speak Japanese regardless of the nationality of the spirit summoned.”

That is the case…

“Not long ago I saw a program of Itako (a spirit medium in the north east regions of Japan) channeling on television. At that time Itako summoned Marilyn Monroe. To summon Monroe alone is hilarious, but that Monroe could even speak Japanese. Overall, I felt it was very strange and very funny.”

“Is it?”

“There are such cases, but on the other hand, there are also mediums like Eugene Davis, Rosemary Brown and Frederic Thompson.”

“Ha…?”

The monk explained to be by the side, “Mrs. Brown composed music with the help of spirits. She supposedly had no musical training herself, but could make music through summoning a spirit. The spirits that were summoned include Beethoven and Chopin and other composers, so some of her music was even orchestral styled. The music was completely in the style of the various composers, and from a musical perspective they appeared to be very highly received.

“As for Thompson it was drawing. He let the spirit of a painter called Robert

Swain Gifford possess his body, and allowed it to draw. The drawings were all sceneries, places that Gifford visited when he was alive; furthermore, they were places he never mentioned a desire to draw to his friends. More incredibly, Thompson had neither visited that location, nor seen a photograph of the place. Of course, the art was completely in the style of Gifford."

"He…"

John nodded.

"Despite all these, amongst the mediums there are those who excel at answering questions and making predictions. Professor Davis also once said, rather than calling users of this type of power 'mediums', they are more likely to be ESPers. Personally, he did not believe answers and prophecies etc were passed on by spirits."

"Hmm hmm"

"So it was like that." The monk quietly muttered.

"Masako would be considered a medium of the latter type. Whether it is answering questions or making prophecies, she is excellent. In other words, rather than calling Masako a medium, she is more likely to be a psychometrist. She also said that she finds it easier with spirits that have a stronger connection."

Yasuhara sighed, looking concerned.

"It's really complicated."

For no reason I simply could not relax.

"As for this, I know… But what exactly is going on? Did it just change such that Masako does not have the ability to see spirits?"

"I'm not saying she is completely incapable of that. But if we consider 'Masako can see spirits', it is more likely that she has a 'clear vision' through an object, the school… although I'm not too sure myself."

Hmm~

"That's why Masako need not necessarily be able to see those spirits. Right now, right here we might be swamped by spirits Masako could not feel."

I see…

“Mai, do you understand?”

“Ah… I’m getting a headache…”

The monk sighed.

“Me too. It’s because of thinking about some unimaginable things.”

“Exactly.”

“Therefore, Mai,” the monk looked at me.

“Have you felt anything yet?”

Me?

Before I could reply, Yasuhara blurted out, “Ah, haven’t you said it before. The fire would be in Broadcast Room or something like that.”

John and the monk turned to face me.

Wu… Wait a little. That might have been just a simple dream.

“Mai?”

With the monk’s urging, I related the incident with difficulty.

“It was a dream I had when I was napping.”

“And then?”

“I say…”

Trembling with fear, I described the dream. Of course, I removed the part where Naru appeared.

With a serious face, the monk stood up.

“Mai. Go to sleep. Go and sleep now.”

“Ha?”

“Your dreams have meanings. It’s collecting information. Be a good child now and go to bed.”

“That’s right. Mai-san, please go and sleep.”

What happened? Even John was like this.

“It could be just a simple dream.”

“That’s impossible. The exorcism in the Locker Room was really done by Hara-san and Matsuzaki-san.”

Uh?

“Bu… But, it might be a coincidence…”

“Did you know? This was researched by Charles Tart and others: dreams and ESP have a very deep connection.”

“Ha…”

“Especially the initial cycles of REM sleep. It’s known to experience ESP type phenomenon then.”

“Yes. A more accurate way of putting it is d-ASC, discrete-Altered State of Consciousness.”

Wait a minute...

“This state of the consciousness dissociating is the strongest, when mediums summon, or when ESPers use their powers of psychometry. Just as Naru said, you have latent ESP. Furthermore you got the part about Ayako doing the exorcism right. Your dreams definitely have meanings. Go to sleep.”

That can’t be. Furthermore, can’t you stop endlessly saying those profound words? To start, even if you order me to sleep, it’s not that simple to sleep just like that!

“Forget it.”

It was Yasuhara who piped up.

“Even if it is Taniyama-san, it is troubling to be forced by others like this.”

Exactly, exactly.

“And she does not seem to believe in her own abilities.”

Yeah yeah.

“We can’t rely on Masako. We were just grasping at last straw that you are,

Mai. Perhaps, like Masako's ability to see spirits, you would not be able to accurately predict this situation."

"That's right. The more reports the merrier, that's decided."

But…

"Tonight we will find out."

Yasuhara said with certainty.

"Tonight, or more accurately tomorrow morning, if the fire happens we would know to exactly what degree we can rely on Taniyama-san's dreams. If a fire occurs in the Broadcast Room, you will be able to believe in your own abilities, Taniyama-san."

En… maybe…

"If that's the case, Taniyama-san will be helping us overall."

"Young man, since when did you start to be Mai's manager?"

"From now on."

Really… I'll follow your wishes then…

At dusk everyone gathered; the monk and John explained the entirety of the situation.

Although I had anticipated it from the start, Ayako and Masako gave me cold looks. Contrastingly Naru and Lin-san remained expressionless.

Before Ayako could let out her sharp tongue to speak, Naru raised his hands to ask for silence.

"Yasuhara-kun is right. We only need to see where the fire occurs to find out. Lin –"

Naru turned to the Lin-san who stood at his back waiting like an attached spirit.

"Set up equipment in the Broadcast Room."

Really? Is it alright to believe the dream I had? I will not be held responsible…

With unsettled feelings, I moved the equipment into the Broadcast Room. I

asked Naru where it was suspicious, he replied, “over there”, with a confidence of a psychic. I was a little suspicious, but nevertheless, I was a little happy. But if there was no fire I would become a laughing stock. “I have to get this right this time”, I thought in my heart.

Waiting for the results of the experiment, I anxiously awaited the arrival of dawn. When the sky brightened, more accurately at 4:32:24 am, flames suddenly spurted from a cool wall.

It was the Broadcast Room.

# 8

We happened to be outside the Broadcast Room at that time.

As it was about time for the fire to happen, we observed the situation in the room through the equipment. Of course, the Broadcast Room was not the only one under observation. Lin-san and John were outside the Locker Room waiting and observing the situation inside.

Then, the only place where a fire broke out was the Broadcast Room.

Through the monitor, Naru, the monk, Yasuhara and I saw the wall ignite with our own eyes. Out of the blue, flames spurted from the wall in the room.

The fire was more intense than those previously reported. In an instant, the ceiling was charred, and the blaze had spread through the room.

Carrying fire extinguishers, the monk and Yasuhara rushed into the room.

“Well done.”

The monk applauded me. I began to feel very perplexed.

“I got it right. What should I do?” To tell the truth, that was what I was feeling. From now wouldn’t everyone anticipate that my hunches might be right? Perhaps I would continue to predict things correctly, perhaps I would not. What would I do if my predictions were not right?

In contrast to me, who was at my wit’s end, Naru wore an exceptionally blank look and asked, “Where are the other locations where there are will-o’-the-wisps?”

“The Printing Room and… LL classroom and…”

My voice tapered as I recalled the rooms where I saw will-o’-the-wisps in the dream.

This was a really incredible incident…

Suddenly the weight of responsibility rested on my shoulders. It would trouble everyone greatly if I provided false information. Even I was not sure whether what I said was true or false. What should I do?

“Mai?” Looking at the silent me, Naru urged.

“The will-o’-the-wisp in the Sickbay felt larger. But this might be pure coincidence. The future predictions might not be correct…”

Naru’s biting words countered my petrified reply.

“I don’t have any great hope for you.”

*Pissed off* sound.

No. That’s the way it should be. It would be terrible if everyone expected great things of me. Despite saying that, it felt a little lonely inside. Ah ah, the human being is really complicated.

Talking about complicated, Masako and Ayako, who had hurried to the Broadcast Room, looked at me with extremely complicated expressions. Putting aside confident-without-reason Ayako, I could understand Masako’s feelings.

You have always been carrying such a heavy responsibility. If it were me, I would have a little confidence in myself if my predictions were right a hundred times. But just as my confidence started growing, my predictions suddenly stopped being correct, with Ayako or someone else correctly predicting it instead, I would be really shaken.

This time no matter what type of sarcastic comments they make, I will endure it. Yeah.

“Don’t think too much about it. Just behave as you normally would. If you think too much you would end up not being able to come up with anything.”

“Okay…”

I shifted my gaze. The camera quietly standing in the middle of the Broadcast Room caught my eye.

Although the fire was fortunately extinguished immediately, the equipment set up there was a pathetic sight.

“Poor thing…”

I caressed the camera that was covered in white by the fire extinguisher.

“Hey, Naru, is this camera spoilt?”

Naru shrugged.

“It should be ruined. At the very least it can’t be adjusted.”

“Wa, what a waste…”

The camera was very expensive. That was what I had heard before.

Naru crisply said, “I already have it insured.”

Ah, is that so? That’s good… then…en?

“Naru. Just now, what did you say?”

“En?”

“You didn’t just say that you “have it insured”, did you?”

When Naru and I met, this unreasonably expensive camera played a part. Naru said to me, who had accidentally spoilt the camera, “Will you compensate? If not, you’ll have to work for me.” What in the world was that? Wasn’t it already insured?

“Then… shouldn’t it be that at that time I didn’t have to pay compensation?”

Naru played deaf and dumb.

“You only wanted a helper so you tricked me then, you bastard~”

Flustered, John opened his mouth to speak.

“Forget it. Just be glad that nothing happened in the end. Al…Although it’s like this, it is really regretful, Shibuya-san. It was so rare to witness a fire that started automatically; although it was an incredible opportunity to take a video, in this mess the precious tape is also…”

The situation was already a huge mess, to continue quarrelling would be of no use. John probably meant something like that. (John, as usual, speaks unclearly when he gets flustered) However, saying that, John’s vision, my vision, and everyone else’s vision were fixed on Naru’s hands. A black colored, rectangular –

tape.

The monk's icy voice came from the side.

"This is a real example of a roll of tape being more precious than human life."

This, this fellow.

Naru turned to Lin-san.

"Lin, set up equipment again."

Abominable… this absurd scientist!!

I wasn't the only one who screamed that silently.

# Chapter 3 - Blue Silhouette

## 1

On the second day, we collected the equipment from the classrooms where no changes were recorded, and added them primarily to the LL classroom, with the remainder going to the Printing Room and the Sickbay.

We bustled around the school compound where lessons were still going on, collecting and checking the data. We also discussed our next move and our plans for exorcisms.

I, ordered to collect tapes, stormed out of the Meeting Room.

I was furious and did not plan to follow Naru's orders just now. Yeah, forget it. It's more relaxing to run errands.

I jogged in the corridor; just as I was about to cross the terrace, "How's it going? Is the exorcism complete?" an unexpected voice addressed me. I turned back; it was Matsuyama.

Yuck. I've run into the irritating bastard.

"We are currently trying our very best."

Matsuyama smiled crookedly.

"This morning a fire occurred."

"Ah…"

"You lot are unable to exorcise a single spirit, are you?"

He's right… all the exorcisms were failures.

I had no retort to that; Matsuyama continued speaking. “There aren’t any spirits to begin with. So mind your behavior, understand? It was all just a temporary hallucination on the part of the students. So hurry up and get lost.”

“There are flaws in your argument, Sensei.”

“What?!”

“You bastard, do you believe in existence of spirits, or not? Could you spell that out for me?” Although that was what I thought, “it’s no use to preach to pigs”. I gently lowered my head.

“Nothing. Excuse me.”

I hurried away; Matsuyama bellowed behind me, “You are mesmerized by spirits and other nonsense, and you even end up skiving! Do you want me to tell you what would happen to people who blindly follow foolish superstitions?!”

I turned back. What did he want to say? It couldn’t be…

“What would happen?”

Matsuyama smiled.

“There was also such a person in our school. One who was fascinated by the occult and met a tragic end.”

“You are talking about… Sakauchi-kun?”

He was the first year student who committed suicide. He had written “ghost hunter” as his future aspiration.

“Be careful not to end up like him. Sakauchi is regretting it in the next world.”

“That’s saying, Sensei doesn’t think Sakauchi-kun’s death was regrettable?”

“What?”

“ ‘Such things happened because he was fascinated by nonsense, he got what he deserved.’ Is that what you mean?”

“Who said that?”

It was you…

“That was just what I understood from what I heard.”

All I heard were words delighting in the misfortune of others. Could such a person still be considered a teacher?

“What’s that, you… What’s that insolent attitude about?”

F**k…

“I still have work to do, excuse me.”

I nodded to him once more, turned and walked away from him.

Is there anything that can be said to one such as him?

“Hey, wait a second.”

The furious Matsuyama reached out.

I will hit you if you touch me!

At that moment, loud noises and the sound of many people screaming came from the classroom in front of me.

Immediately past the terrace was the Art Room.

I ran into that classroom. Matsuyama was right behind me.

“What happened?!”

I jumped in shock when the door opened.

All the students were standing. There were a few people squatting. Shards of broken glass littered the classroom - shards that were slightly curved and milky white.

I looked to the ceiling.

There were 3 rows of 4 fluorescent lamps side by side. There was not a single fluorescent tube up there.

“What happened?!” Matsuyama asked the students and the teacher who sat fallen on the teaching platform.

The fluorescent lights had fallen down. All the fluorescent lights in the classroom.

I suddenly recalled – immediately beneath this Art Room was the Geography Room.

# 2

All the students evacuated the Art Room.

A vacant classroom. Tables arranged haphazardly. Blood-stained glass shards scattered all over the floor.

Most of the students were slightly injured in one way or another. They received treatment in their respective classrooms.

“It’s my fault,” whispered John who stared blindly at the classroom.

John had conducted the exorcism in the Geography Room.

“This isn’t something you could have done anything about; we would never have expected them to escape to the classroom above.” I tried to console John. He silently shook his head.

Naru picked up a shard that had fallen on a table.

“All the fluorescent tubes fell out at the same time…?” Without moving a muscle, he surveyed the shard.

“Don’t you think that the spirit got more powerful?”

Indeed…

Normally, only one fluorescent light would fall out in the Geography Room; never before had 2 lights fallen out simultaneously.

Within my mind, a scene took shape.

Ayako brandishing her jade rosary. The will-o’-the-wisp escaping. The spirit escaping to other locations, tangling with the smaller wisps there. Wisps swirling around each other as though in battle. And then the larger wisp devouring the smaller one.

“This morning’s fire, too, was more severe than those previously reported. Luckily there were people near the Broadcast Room… otherwise it wouldn’t just

be a small fire.”

Hearing Naru’s words, I could not help groaning.

“The Art Room… what strange rumors happened there?”

The monk answered in reply, “Indeed it was… ‘The Plaster Model that Changed Direction’. The plaster model’s direction changed suddenly. It suddenly turned to face the back on its own or something.”

“I don’t think that will happen again.”

“Mai?”

Everyone looked at me, surprised.

“I think the spirit that was here has already been devoured by the spirit that escaped from the Geography Room. Hence that spirit became stronger. It must be so.”

Naru looked at me darkly.

“Is that Mai’s intuition?”

“Yes.”

Masako and Ayako looked at me with complicated expressions.

It was like they wanted to tell me to shut up. But that was what I felt. The monk knocked my head.

“What should we do, Naru-chan?”

“Perhaps… it might be better to put off the exorcisms…”

“Yes. It would be troublesome if those spirits escaped again.”

Just as the monk agreed to Naru, “I will continue exorcising.” Ayako declared loudly.

“Hey hey, that’s not too good.”

“To prevent the spirits from escaping, I will erect a Kekkai (barrier) before exorcising. There shouldn’t be a problem with that?”

“Would such a simple solution work?” Naru asked calmly.

“I will show you.”

“In that case, please slowly exorcise those smaller, harmless spirits. If the spirit here was to escape again, the consequences would be unimaginable.”

A furious Ayako was rooted to her spot. However, Naru ignored her.

“If what Mai says is true… we have already let them escape once, if they escape again our reputation would be in danger.”

I felt a chill down my back.

If… spirits consume other spirits and grow, and that continues on and on… what would happen in the end?

If in the end only one spirit remains…

Just at that moment, Masako started shrieking.

“What’s wrong?!”

“What happened?!”

Masako, green in the face, squatted on the floor. Everyone rushed to her side.

I, too, walked towards Masako. – Suddenly, that appeared.

All of a sudden my vision inverted. Brightness disappeared; darkness descended. The floors and walls turned transparent. Quickly my field of vision widened, and in front of me was a view of the entire school. I know. I know it all: exactly what is happening at what location. Then I heard a sad cry. It was not Masako’s cry. Who is it… which other person?

It was the second floor of the South Block. That was the 2-4 classroom. A black will-o’-the-wisp waited.

A dark pit opened in the floor, white spirits were sucked into it.

What was that?! What happened?!

Suddenly the white spirit took on human form. It was a human figure that let out sad cries as it was engulfed by the black pit.

That was… Sakauchi-kun?!

It was Sakauchi-kun. Hands outstretched, as though grasping at air, he was

slowly engulfed by the will-o'-the-wisp. The dark flames surrounded him, and he sank slowly into the sea of fire.

Stop it…

I closed my eyes, blocked my ears.

Even then I could still see, hear.

Please… somebody stop it!

Please!

As quickly as it appeared, my vision suddenly went back to normal.

Masako and I sat on the ground, green in the face. Everyone else observed us blankly.

"What exactly… happened?" The monk asked urgently.

Before I could answer Masako spoke.

"Sakauchi-kun… has disappeared."

Tears rolled down her doll-like face.

"It was just as Mai-san said. The spirits here are feeding on each other. Sakauchi-kun… had been devoured."

Masako cried, looking at me. Her trembling hand grasped my arm.

"You saw it too, Mai?"

"En…"

With a trembling hand I held Masako's hand.

"It was really scary."

"Yes."

"What happened to Sakauchi-kun?"

Masako continued weeping and did not reply.

He was eaten…

and he had not been purified. Just like that, to never rest in peace, to be eaten by that monster…

# 3

“This is an abnormal situation.” Naru announced.

Not long after we witnessed that cruel vision, in the midst of lessons in that classroom, a giant black dog appeared.

That dog mysteriously appeared, knocked the tables into a mess, and used its sharp claws and pointed fangs on the escaping teacher and students, then, like the wind, it vanished. 6 were slightly injured, 1 severely so.

“Is there such an evil spirit on this Earth?!

The monk paced the Meeting Room, frustrated.

“You call it a spirit?! Let’s not joke here; at this level it should be called a monster!”

It was the first time I had ever heard of something like this, too: spirits attacking people. The result of that were inexplicable cases of sickness and happenings. The spirit took on substance, and dealt out real damage to people.

Naru moved equipment into the freshly blood-stained classroom. Just as he was about to complete moving the equipment, Naru’s actions stopped.

“There’s no reason for this…”

Naru frowned.

“First, I have never heard of spirits cannibalizing on each other.”

“Because it is a monster.”

Ayako sighed. The monk suddenly turned back.

“If it is a monster, isn’t that under the jurisdiction of a Miko?”

“You’ve got to be joking. Isn’t that mainly managed by Monks?”

Is this the time to argue over this detail?

Naru looked at his notebook. It contained the notes about the investigation in the school.

“The response in 3-1 has also disappeared. The initial response was so clear too.”

The real, abnormal response that had been present up till this morning had completely vanished. Of course, the stench was also gone. It had completely disappeared.

“Was the spirit there also consumed…?”

Naru said that and lapsed into silence.

Just as everyone was lost for words, Yasuhara appeared.

Yasuhara probably felt the strange atmosphere about us.

“Could I say a few words?”

I don’t even know if anyone was listening.

“That… some terrible things have happened.”

“Young Yasuhara, your news is really up to date.” (sarcastic) Yasuhara replied the monk’s comments with a bitter smile.

“Everybody in the school knows what happened. An ambulance was even called. Besides these, I heard some more slightly worrying news.”

“What news?”

Naru’s voice was a little gloomy. Yasuhara wore an apologetic expression. “Perhaps it is something unrelated; if you are busy it can wait…”

“There’s nothing much going on now. Please tell us.”

With renewed vigor, Naru sat on the chair. Unconsciously Yasuhara shirked.

“That… it’s actually like this; I tried tracing the origin of Kokkuri.”

What?

“Yesterday during my discussion with Taniyama-san, she said the Kokkuri we play here was really too strange. I asked those who had played Kokkuri before whom they learnt it from, and traced it backwards in that order…”

Oh, did he really investigate it?

Naru's expression turned deep.

"Then, did you find anything out?"

"Nothing that is very clear. I only found out that we started playing Worikiri-sama sometime after the second semester. And about the source, there are 2 possibilities. Some say they heard it from a first year student, others say they learnt it from someone in the Aesthetics Department."

Saying that, Yasuhara's expression turned bleak.

"And, what is more worrisome is, amongst the first years in the aesthetics department, that…" Yasuhara said, stammering.

"Perhaps this is completely meaningless; the late Sakauchi was from the Aesthetics Department."

Everyone was mildly shocked.

Naru had sunk deep in thought.

"It's really incomprehensible… Does this have any meaning, or not?" Naru muttered. He lightly tapped the table with his fingers.

"Anyway, it was after the second semester, and it started from a first year or from the Aesthetic Department… And then it gained popularity in the school and an uncountable number of summonings were performed. Subsequently those summoned spirits…"

Naru gently shook his head when he finished.

"As expected it is still very strange. Even if an infinite number of summonings were performed how can completely untrained people, even after a thousand or two thousand summonings, succeed in calling forth a cannibalistic spirit?"

"That…"

Yasuhara hummed and hawed.

"I don't know if it has any relation to that?"

"That?" Naru questioned.

To which Yasuhara replied, “Haven’t you heard? This school is built on a cemetery.”

Eagerly anticipating his reply, everyone was immediately very disheartened. The monk said, “That’s nothing much, it is very common.”

He sighed, and tilted his head backwards.

“Ah, you think I’m lying. No, this is true. This place is called the Ryokuryo Ruins, it became a cemetery in the Nara era. If you dig in the field, tombstones and human remains can be found.”

We shared a glance.

“Is this true, Yasuhara-kun?”

“It really is true. Will this have any connection to this incident?”

Naru sank deeper into thought.

“So that’s how it is… The so-called Old Tomb is the place where the Kekkai was erected to prevent spirits from trawling the Earth and causing hauntings. The spirits bound in the ruins have emerged in large numbers… that shouldn’t be the case. The floating spirits summoned into the school are unable to leave due to the Kekkai… there’s a possibility that it’s like that. Then, there are large numbers of spirits floating around the school. Indeed… the spirits could even follow a person and that person might even bring it home… I’ve never heard of this theory before.”

“It is like this.”

I was taking notes. Indeed, there hasn’t been a theory about the spirits causing strange incidents within and also outside the school.

Naru tapped the table with his finger.

“With this we can account for half of the incident. But, there’s the other half… Why are the students here capable of summoning so many spirits with such ease?”

The monk said, “Could it be that somewhere in the ruins, there is something that can summon and attract spirits?”

“En… Right from the start the props used in spell casting have an innate ability to affect spirits… But, what is going on here? This is a place where the spirits are sealed.”

“If it is used to attract spirits…, there are small special differences from those used in spell casting.”

“So it is. The spirits are enclosed in the grave, the grave is then sealed; perhaps there are places where such spells are used. If spirits are gathered around it always feels different. Nothing seems to work here, in this school.”

Naru groaned softly, crinkled his brow and sank deeper into thought.

# 4

The darkness of night settled over the school. Thinking carefully about it, a “school” is not a place well suited for night. Such a large and vast emptiness filled with darkness, while said to be dangerous, it makes one feel lonely.

I, who remained alone in the Meeting Room, was ordered by Naru to retrieve the tape from the LL classroom.

The school, completely devoid of human life; endless corridors; lifeless windows side by side; dim light.

I left this building and walked towards the first floor of the East Block. I progressed through the long corridors depending on the light of a torch. It was the innermost classroom in the East Block, just before the turn into the South Block.

Opening the door, the night vision camera and thermometer were clearly visible. I stood quietly and continued working. I bent down next to the camera’s recorder, and extracted the rectangular tape. No, I planned to extract the tape.

At that moment, as though it had been sucked out, the light from the torch extinguished.

“What?”

The room was pitch-black. I was terrified, and I thought to retrieve the tape quickly. I pressed the eject button, but the machine did not respond. Had the power source been severed?

“A power outage?”

As the words left my mouth, I decided that was impossible. A torch and a power outage have got nothing to do with each other.

It’s not good…

I stood up hurriedly. I had to leave this place. Just as I straightened, a chill went down my back. Damp, icy cold air caressed my back, and left me shivering.

I could see a blue glow in the distance. That was the light of the emergency exit. From there, there would be a corridor leading back to the North Block.

I ran through long corridors towards that light. My footsteps echoed hollowly through the school compound.

With a final spurt, I used all my strength to open the door and dash onto the terrace.

There was the narrow space of the corridor. Looking from the window, I could see the field lit by external lighting. It was such a vast and empty space that it felt like there would be a sound the very next second. And it was brighter than inside; perhaps it would be a little better if it was dark.

I found my unreasonable fear pathetically funny; I leaned against the closed door half panting and half laughing at my own uselessness.

In front of me was the entry to the North Block. The school compound was as dark as pitch. Over there was a tightly closed glass door. There should be an emergency light over the door. It exuded a green glow.

Suddenly my vision was pulled to, and caught at that place.

There was a small silhouette of a person. That – who was that? – that child's two hands were against the window as he looked towards where I was. There couldn't possibly be a child in this place, in this school so late at night.

Then, what was that? It was a clear black shadow of a person. That person had both hands on the glass, and was looking here with his forehead plastered to the glass.

Silently lamenting, I ran back to the East Block. Before I shut the door, I clearly saw the door to the North Block at the other end open.

There were stairs next to the door. I dashed up the stairs.

I want to go back. I want to go back to the Meeting Room.

After I reached the second floor I sprinted to the third. I swiveled on the landing and ran on. 'Hurry back to the Meeting Room.' I thought as I grabbed

the railing of the stairs. I could see the wall of the third floor above and in front of me as I looked up the dark stairwell.

There was a blinking green light that looked like an emergency light. And, there, was the small figure of a person.

My heart thumped loudly.

The figure squatted at the top of the stairs, looking down at me.

Due to the back light I could not clearly see the person's features. But, it was a child. That was the only thing I could tell clearly.

The child squatted at the top of the stairs, gazing quietly at me. With the light behind him I could see a little of his face. The outline of his face looked like he was smiling.

I maintained eye contact and slowly backed down the stairs. Suddenly I turned and ran as fast as I could down.

I ran down one flight of stairs, and sprinted towards the second floor corridor. Checking the stairs behind me while I planned on opening the door, I suddenly ran into something that set me into instant retreat.

It was very bright outside the door. There, stood the dark figure.

It was about as tall as my waist. It had slender arms and slender legs. It was obviously the figure of a child. But, if it was a child, did it have such a large head?

I retreated one step at a time. The child's shadow stood there unmoving.

Two steps, three steps backwards. Then the figure moved.

One thin arm rose and settled on the door handle.

Stumbling, I ran to the right, into the dark corridor. Behind me, I heard the heavy sound of the door opening.

It's catching up…

It was getting difficult to breathe, my legs felt like they were tied up.

Where is everybody?

Is anybody around?

Looking out of the window from the corridor, a pale light lit the corridor from an angle. On both sides were identical rows of windows. Window. Window.

I felt like I could not take another step forward.

I could not help looking behind. As I turned my knee felt like it had been shattered.

He was there.

The shadow of the child walked slowly from the door.

I wanted to run. Suddenly I saw the emergency light at the very end of the other side.

My heart thumped once loudly.

The green glow of the emergency light. Immediately beneath that there would be somebody there. Who would be there? The child, of course,. He would be squatting there, hugging his knees. The green light glowed brightly, but it felt darker than black.

I turned my head.

There too… was the silhouette of the child.

He was walking slowly towards me. Deep in my head I could hear the soft sound of a child's laughter.

What should I do?!

Coincidentally I was standing right in front of a classroom door. I leapt towards the door and rushed into the classroom. As I entered, I noticed the sign "Biology Preparation Room" above the door.

Were the curtains drawn, or were there no windows at all? I could not tell in the absolute darkness.

I shut the door and collapsed on the floor, and searched with trembling hands. On the inside of the door there was a lock. It was just a very simple latch lock. Even that was better than nothing. Clatter clatter, I locked the door and finally let out a sigh of relief.

It doesn't matter…

It shouldn't matter anymore…

As my breathing started to slow my stomach started to hurt . As my heart was beating very fast, I felt my ears ringing. My throat felt like it had be sliced open as I gasped for breath. "I'll wait here for a while", I thought as I hugged my shaking knees.

What should I do? I'm trapped in a corner. Is there anyone nearby?

Once my breath was calm, I tuned my ears to pick up any activity outside. I wanted to see if I could hear anyone's voice, or if I could feel any activity, *etc.*

Suddenly the sound "Ka Dong" rang out.

I jumped in shock. It was like something had hit the door, creating that loud noise.

Clatter… Ka Dong.

It was the sound of something hard being moved, very near to where I was, probably right within this very room!

Where was it? My legs were already unable to move. My arms and legs were like they had been tied in dead knots; they didn't feel like a part of my body.

Clatter… Ka Dong.

It was very near. Just somewhere in this room… somewhere up there… just a distance right in front of me.

I surveyed the darkness before me. Vaguely I could see the outline of the shelves at the 2 ends of the room. And from a shelf, came the noise.

Clatter.

The soft sound continued to resonate; then it became an ear-splitting sound of something shattering.

What?!

It sounded like glass breaking. At the same time a whiff of a saccharine sweet smell wafted over.

This is…

I leapt towards the door.

It was the smell of formalin !

Without care for what was on the outside, I grabbed the door handle and tried to wrestle it open.

Behind me came the sound of more glass shattering. Small droplets of liquid splashed on my feet.

The smell of formalin got stronger.

“Naru! Naru! Help me!”

Is there no one? Anyone, anyone will do, let me out of this place!

With a crash came the sound of yet more glass shattering.

The sweet smell intensified. I started to feel dizzy…

Is there no one at all?! Save me!

Formalin! The things which are stored in formalin in bottles in the Biology Preparation Room!

No, No!

Behind me the sound of glass shattering continued, unrelenting. Because of the smell of formalin I could not breathe, my ears started ringing. I was dizzy and nauseous.

The floor suddenly started shaking, and the ground hit my body

No… not like that…

It was me… I fell onto the ground…

I…

… … … …

# Chapter 4 - Chrysalis

## 1

The wind was blowing.

It was a night breeze. I felt gusts of refreshing wind blowing over me. It felt like my body had been blown away.

… but it was not a very precise sensation.

I opened my eyes.

It was still night around me… wind was swirling; then I was like a bubble in the atmosphere, floating in mid air. That was what I felt.

In the distance beneath me, there were some white lights; weak, un-dazzling white lights. I could feel it.

My consciousness flowed towards the light source, and suddenly I regained my sight. The school was beneath me.

In the night, the school appeared transparent. Illuminated within the school were will-o'-the-wisps or perhaps dark flames.

I was extremely shocked. Their numbers had decreased. The immense amount of floating white spirits had been so quickly and so drastically reduced. Even the original number of black will-o'-the-wisps had decreased. There were 4 which had grown horrendously huge. Compared to this, there were very few little wisps left…

I carefully studied every corner of the school; what I saw was the continued consumption of small spirits.

Even those that were like will-o'-the-wisps - they floated weightlessly, then, attracted to the large will-o'-the-wisps, they were devoured.

Even during my observation, the number of will-o'-the-wisps had visibly decreased.

Sakauchi-kun was devoured in front of my eyes. That scene rose from my memory.

It was petrifying… A disgusting scene.

Unwilling to see more of those scenes, I shifted my vision. I spotted the figures in the second floor of the East Block.

… I was there: in the second floor classroom, a minute classroom. I saw myself there.

I saw myself lying on the ground and the crowd surrounding me. Ayako and the Monk and Masako, and there was John, Lin-san and Yasuhara, and also, Naru…

Ayako was shaking me. The Monk was trying to stop her. The Biology Preparation Room was flooded with a liquid. And strange things lay scattered throughout that liquid. Shards of broken glass sparkled and glowed.

I was so far away, yet I could see so clearly.

Naru said something to Lin-san. Then Lin-san reached beneath my body and lifted me up.

Tsk, I would have preferred Naru to carry me!

Although that was what I thought, Naru's slender arms are probably unable to handle my 40kg body weight.

Just like that, my body was carried away. It was quietly carried to the Sickbay at the end of the first floor.

… … … …

Wait a moment!

Isn't this a terrible situation?!

I am floating in the air, and then I see my body moved away by other people.

Stop joking already! I couldn’t possibly be dead, could I?!

How could this happen!

No! I’m still not ready to die!

My body was laid down in the Sickbay. Naru looked at me, and caressed my cheek. Ah, ah, ah… his face was so close. … It was not what I imagined.

Naru was saying something.

What? I can’t hear it.

What?!

“Mai!”

I blinked.

“Mai?!”

A hand gently tapped my face. Eyes framed with extremely long lashes were right in front of me.

The pair of beautiful clear eyes quickly increased their distance from me. Naru tapped my forehead.

“Are you awake yet?”

I scanned my surroundings. Naru’s concerned face was closest to me. Looking over his shoulder were the Monk and Ayako, Masako and John, Yasuhara and Lin-san.

“How do you feel?”

Naru sat gently on the side of the bed.

“Mai?” he said, tapping my forehead once more.

“I’m still alive…” I said hoarsely. Suddenly everyone let out their held breaths.

“Of course you are still alive.”

Naru looked gently at me.

“You only fainted because you inhaled formalin vapor. How do you feel?”

Feel?

“Feel like vomiting…”

My chest felt tight. It was like the sensation of severe motion sickness. The world spun.

“How in the world did you end up in that type of a place? I told you to go to the LL classroom.”

Because the electricity in that classroom was cut; when I was escaping, frightened, I was chased by the child; and in the end I could only escape to that place…

“It’s not my fault.”

When I finished, an ice-cold object was placed on my forehead. Ayako had placed a damp towel on my forehead.

“How is it?”

“It’s very comfortable…”

“You really gave me a shock. Why were you wondering around the school on your own?”

“Because I had to take the tape…”

“Naru, you are also too much.”

Ayako glared at Naru. “You actually let Mai go to that type of place by herself!”

Naru shrugged.

Ayako observed Naru’s response indifferently, then bent down beside me.

“What happened, tell us about it.”

“That…”

I related the entire incident, from the power outage in the LL classroom, to my escape into the Biology Preparation Room, in detail. It’s not like I was purposely trying to scare everyone or evoke everyone’s pity or anything. If I didn’t relate it all, I felt like I would vomit.

After I had finished, Ayako turned to Masako.

“Masako, is that thing still around?”

Masako shook her head.

“No, I don’t think it is here. It’s already fine.”

Hu…

The Monk raised his hand and patted my head.

“You shocked me. You were fainted in a large pool of formalin. For a moment I thought something gory had happened.”

Wu… I don’t even want to imagine that. I don’t want to think of that.

“Really, what did you learn how to exorcise spirits for? Did you not try it?”

“Ah… I forgot.”

“Stupid.”

“You’re right…”

While the Monk and I were conversing, Naru stood up.

“Anyway you are not injured so there’s no problem anymore. Matsuzaki-san, could you please stay with Mai for a while.”

After turning to Ayako he looked at the remaining members.

“Get back to work.”

And abandon me here?

My displeasure probably showed on my face. Ayako looked at me.

“Aiya… are you not happy with me?”

“There’s no such thing…”

Please don’t leave me alone.

Ayako sighed dramatically.

“Ok, you guys go ahead. Mai has me for company.”

Naru nodded, and everyone left the Sickbay. Ayako watched them leave, and then said, “How is it? Are you still uncomfortable?”

“I still feel like vomiting.”

“Take a short nap. You’ll feel better after that.”

With that, Ayako changed the towels. How comfortable…

“Thank you…”

“Aiya, that was really honest.”

“Occasionally.”

I patted my forehead.

Ayako… thank you.

I smiled and shut my eyes.

# 2

A fog had risen. Tiny droplets of water were flowing. A milky white fog.

Hidden in the mist was the shadow of trees.

Where is this place…?

I looked around me. Tall trees; fog that enveloped everything. It was very dark.

Hu… I let out my breath. I understood.

I'm getting used to this. This is the semi-consciousness of sleep.

Ai… I'll ignore that for the time being. Where exactly is this place?

I looked around. Rivulets of fog flowed around me. The fog slowly thinned, and soon I could see a Torii in front of me.

It was a shrine.

I passed through the Torii. Beyond the Torii was a prayer path made of stone. On the right there was a small red Torii. Beyond a pair of ceramic foxes was a small memorial hall.

Is it the Inari Shrine?

The fog started swirling again. I noticed there was an immense building in front of me.

Ah, this is the Main Hall.

The shrine was dimly lit. Standing in front of the Main Hall was…

"Naru?"

Looking like it was about to dissolve into the fog was Naru's figure.

Naru's expression was hard. There was no trace of the gentle smiling face that only appeared in my dreams.

“That place is very dangerous.” Naru opened his mouth and spoke.

“That place” refers to?

“You know that, don’t you? That is a dangerous place. Hurry up and get up and leave that place. You must not remain there.”

“I don’t understand… what do you mean?”

What is going on? And this shrine is?

“That place is very dangerous. You must remember the exorcism techniques you’ve learnt.”

“Ok…”

Naru suddenly raised his head and looked at the sky. Following Naru, I too looked back. Thick foliage. Wooden Torii. And opposite the row of houses ahead, was the school.

“Have you understood?” Naru asked.

All at once the Torii and the row of houses, and the school, too, became transparent. Right on the school’s first floor was a pulsating thing.

It looked just like the image of an unborn child. A mysterious feeling surrounded the life-like will-o’-the-wisp.

“It’s about to be born…”

I groaned softly.

“That’s right. Up to this day they have been dormant. Very soon it will hatch. If it is allowed to hatch, nobody will be able to stop it.”

Nobody will be able to stop it…

I gazed at the school. That was the Printing Room. And that wasn’t the only location. I know that. There was something in the LL classroom, and the 2-4 classroom too. And the Sickbay also had one. Ah ah, there were so few other spirits around. Practically only these 4 were left, all within such a short time span.

I came to a realization. About 90% of the entire student population – approximately 600 students, in 4 months – approximately 120 days, had

continuously summoned spirits. Thousands of spirits. In such a short time, these spirits had been so greatly reduced. The summoned spirits devoured and absorbed each other, and reduced their numbers to the level currently observed. And the stronger spirits continued to grow… on and on until they took their current form.

With a sudden “Sa”, the vision cleared, and the ongoing scenario in the Printing Room emerged before my eyes. They had finally arrived – John and Yasuhara – at that very dangerous place.

“I’m going back.”

I said that; Naru nodded.

“Be careful…”

The fog swiftly thickened.

“That place is…”

Naru’s figure was swallowed by the fog. Only his voice echoed could be heard.

“… as dangerous as this one… so…”

I woke abruptly. I sat up suddenly at the same time. I turned to look at Ayako, who was sitting beside me.

“How are you?”

“I want to get up already.”

“Wait a moment, are you fine now? You have not slept for long.”

“En. I’m fine. I want to get up.”

I thought to get off the bed. I leaned against the bed, my body swayed. I still felt nauseous when I tried to get up.

“That’s why I said you are forcing yourself. Honestly, sleep a little longer.”

No way. I can’t stand.

“Ayako.”

The will-o’-the-wisp. About to hatch. If it was allowed to hatch nobody will be able to stop it.

“Hurry to the Printing Room.”

“Hey…”

Ayako looked very astonished. I nodded to her. I’m neither sleep dazed, nor am I talking nonsense.

“John and Yasuhara-kun have gone to the Printing Room. That place is very dangerous. So please hurry there to stop the two of them.”

“Wait a moment, Mai.”

Ayako said that, and nodded to me in comprehension.

“Understood. I’m going then.”

After her nod, Ayako’s expression was uneasy.

“Will you be fine on your own? You know how to use exorcism spells?”

“Yes–“

“What do you know? The Ku-ji? The Acalanatha Chant?”

“The one with the Acalanatha Seal.”

“Then remember this.”

Ayako formed a Sword Seal with one hand.

“Like this: remember? Rin (臨), Pyō (兵), Tō (闘), Sha (者), Kai (皆), Jin (陣), Retsu (列), Zai (在), Zen (前).”

Ayako’s hand moved in a cross. It was like marking a grid in mid air. Then she made a final cut in the very center of the grid.

“This is the Ku-ji. Have you remembered it yet?”

“Ok, the first cut is horizontal right? I’ve got it.”

“Do this after the Acalanatha Chant.”

“Yes.”

I forced a smile onto my petrified face. Ayako looked at me, concerned, then ran out of the Sickbay.

# 3

Boneless, my body collapsed back onto the bed. My head hurt. I felt a wave of dizziness pass. I wanted to vomit and…

Then…

Fighting the dizziness, I searched the room for any strange atmosphere.

As I tried to control my breathing, all light in the Sickbay suddenly vanished.

It's here…

"What are you doing… Are you playing with me?"

Indeed, this room is… I turned to look at the beds lined up inside the room. Light from the street lamps outside permeated the windows. The mattresses glowed white in the dark.

My heart raced. The second innermost bed… on the third bed away from me towards the inside of the room… someone slept on the bed. It was a human figure cocooned in the blankets.

"So you have appeared, monster."

It was really incredible. I was so unexpectedly bold. Perhaps the formalin had spoilt a certain part of my brain.

I sat up slowly.

The fellow inside also sat up slowly.

I could tell the air was changing. The air, the atmosphere; something like that was changing, distorting.

There was a vague black thing below the white mattress.

It (referring to the figure on the bed, not the black shadow beneath) rose at the same speed as I did.

I climbed up. It squatted on the bed.

I stacked my hands together; this time I would not forget.

“Naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan.”

The black body beneath the mattress swelled. “Dong”, a deep and abstruse sound resonated from beneath the ground.

Its body grew larger than the bed. Once more, a moan resounded from below.

It was the sound of that thing starting to rise. A putrid smell filled the entire room. It was black; as though it was nothing but shadow, it did not even have an outline. I could only tell that it was extremely immense.

I repeated the chant 3 times, and stacked my fingers together again. I gathered the Sword Seal.

“臨 Rin”

I cut a horizontal line through the air.

“兵 Pyoo”

I made a vertical cut.

“闘 Too”

As my hands moved, with a thump the bed started to shake. I was thrown down from the bed, and landed heavily on the ground.

Cold air crept up my legs. It was sticky, ice-cold air. The figure had gotten off its bed. The mattress covering the gigantic shadow fell onto the ground. Its body sank below, dissolved into the darkness and disappeared.

Where?

I looked around me as I moved to the door without changing posture. (tl/n: she landed on her bottom, flung off the bed; now she scrambles for the door, still on her bottom)

Where is it?

The thin darkness had diffused the room. I could not even see the shadow of anything. With my hands against the wall behind me, I searched for the door.

Leaning on the hardness of the door, I stood up slowly. Just as I was about to open the door, the room rocked violently once more. I momentarily lost my balance and fell down.

At the same time, came a shocking “Dong” that strong enough to shake my body. My body was suddenly suspended in midair. Even before I could think “Uh”, my body landed on the collapsed flooring.

Moaning, I stood up. Taking note on of my surroundings, I tried my best to quickly reach for the door.

I touched a hard object. It felt like rough concrete. It did not feel like the door.

Uh?!

I involuntarily turned my head.

“Ah…”

The door was still there. Just above my head. I turned back and looked into the room. What in the world happened? On side of the floor had dropped beneath floor level!

Once more I stacked my fingers up.

“naumakusanmandabazaradankan.”

I said at high speed.

Click. Click. Soft noises sounded around me. It was like there were some small animals moving agitatedly around on the ground.

“naumakusanmandabazaradankan.”

I was completely blind. The critters were coming closer to me, their numbers were increasing.

“naumakusanmandabazaradankan.”

There was a soft slithering sound. It was coming closer to me. It was already very near.

I released the seal and gathered the Sword Seal and started the horizontal and vertical strokes.

“Rin (臨), Pyō (兵), Tō (闘), Sha (者), Kai (皆), Jin (陣), Retsu (列), Zai (在), Zen (前).”

I made horizontal and vertical cuts.

I brandished the sword seal at that invisible thing.

“Be gone!”

The room suddenly trembled, and the slithering sound cackled to a stop. The miasma vanished. Now’s the time! I hurriedly jumped up and climbed up the wall. After forcing the door open, I held on to the door frame and climbed up. At that moment, something grasped my foot and once more I fell onto the ground.

It hurt to death…

I’m doomed, if I was alone. (tl/n: “I’m screwed if no one saves me.”) I couldn’t even make enough time for my own escape.

The sound of footsteps approached the door.

“Save me!”

“Mai?!”

It was Naru’s voice!

Lying on the broken surface of the shattered floor, I shouted. “Naru!”

“What happened?!”

“Careful!”

The door above my head was open. A figure halted in the doorway, nearly falling in.

“Naru!”

I lifted my head and looked up. Naru looked, stunned, around the room, and quickly extended a hand towards me.

“Come.”

I stretched my arm out towards Naru’s. Just then something tripped my feet. Before I could reach Naru’s snow white hand I was thrown horizontal. Naru jumped into the room, and helped me up. I leaned against the wall while he

stood in front protecting me.

“Where is Ayako?”

“Printing Room.”

As I answering the question, standing behind him, the pitter patter of footsteps and the voices of the monk and the others could be heard.

“What was that noise just now about?!”

With another sound, the room started shaking once more. Naru and I were thrown together onto the floor. At the moment we fell to the ground, the sound of something fracturing came from above.

Something split open with a “peng”. Lifting my head I could see it. The ceiling was about to fall down…!

“Ah…!”

I shut my eyes, and instinctively raised both hands. Then came an intense low pitched crashing sound.

Then I promptly lost consciousness.

# 4

I could feel the ice-cold floor beneath my cheek. Brushing my forehead, some fragments fell down.

I opened my eyes. My surroundings were pitch-black and I could not see a thing. The weight on my back was very warm. Neither my arms nor my legs would be energized. As I tried to force energy to my extremities, the weight on my back disappeared.

At the same time sounds could be heard.

“Mai!”

That was Ayako’s lament.

“We are fine.”

Naru’s voice came from above my face. Naru rose just when I lifted my head. His shadow emerged through the door.

“Naru?! What happened?!” That was Lin-san’s voice.

“The ceiling collapsed. The floor also caved in. That’s all.”

Naru answered as though nothing had happened.

“Is everything all right?”

“Ah.”

Naru answered as he helped me up. He carried me and lifted me up. Lin-san caught my arms from above. Just like this I was pulled up, and placed on the corridor floor. As my body was moved, fragments of something dropped pitter patter down.

Yasuhara patted my back. I did not quite grasp the situation.

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m not sure. I think not.”

Yasuhara let out a breath with a “hu”.

When I turned back blankly, Naru grasped Lin-san’s hand and emerged from the room.

“You’re all right?”

“Ah. It’s not a big deal.” – said as though it was an insignificant event.

The monk said, “What do you call a ‘no big deal’? The ceiling fell in!”

“The ceilings of this type of buildings are only made up of soft wooden boards. It’s no big deal. Mai, are you injured?”

“I’m fine.”

Ayako turned and stared at Naru.

“Why is it able to cause something like this…” – in a trembling voice.

Naru did not answer, brushing his dust covered body. The Monk shone the torch around the Sickbay.

The floor had collapsed exactly following the shape of the wall. And covering that was scattered wooden boards from the ceiling.

“Don’t joke with me.”

The monk’s laughing voice grumbled.

“It has hatched.” I said softly to myself as I got up with Ayako’s help.

“Hatched?”

Everyone turned to me.

“En. They have always been dormant. Now they have already gathered enough energy to hatch. There’s already nothing we can do.”

“Mai, did you hit your head just now?”

Ayako gently shook me.

“…”

I did not answer. I felt no answer was necessary. Because, I knew. That was the

truth of the situation…

Naru sighed as he walked on.

“Regardless, we cannot handle it as we are now. It would be better to seal the school.”

“The school will have a lot to say about that.”

“When they see this floor, they won’t be able to say anything – if they have any sense (of propriety) at all.”

# 5

We walked towards the office. Naru gave the principal a call from there.

Being told to go back to the sleep, I was brought to the Work Room. Under the protection of John, Ayako and Yasuhara, I was forcibly shoved under the covers.

Left without a choice, I fell asleep. When I slept I immediately had a very short dream.

It was somebody's room.

It was a western styled room of about 6 tatami. There was a table and a bed, stereo on a stand, and a bookcase filled with books.

As though there was something attracting me, my eyes were drawn to the spines of the books. "Occult", "Psychic", "Principles and Techniques of High Level Magic", "An Introduction to the Science of the Mysterious", "The Theory of Spirit Worship"…

It was just like the book shelf in our office. A whole load of obscure books…

Exactly whose room was it?

The room was very tidy. Like there was no one living there.

I walked closer to the table. On the study desk was a student's school bag. Around the bag were some loose items, like a stationery holder and a wallet and a Monthly Rail Pass Holder.

I picked up the Pass Holder. I opened it and glanced inside. In it there remained a ticket that had already expired in October. I glanced at the name.

--Sakauchi Tomoaki…

When I woke up the next day I was already past noon. When I opened my eyes, I saw the ugly expressions of 7 people squeezed into the tiny Work Room: Naru, Lin-san, the Monk, John, Ayako, Masako and Yasuhara. I asked them what had

happened after the previous night's incident.

The principal had brought a few teachers along to kick us out of the school. After they saw the floor of the Sickbay, they did turn green, but despite that, they remained very stubborn about not closing the school. Matsuyama, who had came along, insinuated that we had purposely caused the floor to collapse.

Furthermore, they made Naru and the others wait in the Meeting Room, while they gathered the teachers and began a so-called emergency staff meeting.

In the end the meeting took the whole morning, and the conclusion was "cease the investigation, so please leave."

Even though Naru told them many times that the situation in the school was very dangerous, and that if the investigation was not allowed to continue the danger would escalate, they refused to agree.

"Whatever we say, the teachers seem to think that we played some trick on them."

The monk sighed.

"What trick… how could it be?"

"It's not that. The principal never did say that we destroyed their floor. Although what Matsuyama said was approximately of that meaning. In any case, it looks like the principal himself understands that spirit-related strange events have happened in the school. However, he thinks that our clumsy handling caused the situation to deteriorate. Regardless, they have decided to observe for a while, although it is clearly very dangerous."

"How could it be like this…"

My words received no reply. Everyone had sunk into silence.

What should we do? Stop the investigation? What would the very real spirits growing within the school turn into?

"En, I supposed this is the so-called limits of our abilities. If we drop the request mid-way we would not be allowed to enter the school. This, too, is inevitable."

Naru chewed his lips on hearing the Monk's words.

“That is very dangerous… do you want to leave it be?”

Without thinking, I blurted out, “And… if it is allowed to go on what will happen in the end? Would it be as expected, only the strongest spirit remains?”

“What did you say?”

Looking at Naru, I unconsciously straightened.

“That’s why I say…”

“That’s why you say?”

“If the number of spirits continues to decrease… that is to say, if they continue to cannibalize, what would happen? The last remaining spirit would be too strong, and we would be incapable of taking care of it ourselves, right?”

“Cannibalize, and the last remaining spirit…?”

Naru showed a startled expression.

“What’s up?”

His expression was serious.

“What a scary situation… Could this possibly be… a Kodoku making use of spirits…”

“Kodoku?”

When Naru said this, an expression of sudden realization crossed even Lin-san’s face.

We all looked desolate.

“Could you please explain what all this is about?”

“Ignorant.”

“I’m really sorry for that.”

“This so called ‘Kodoku’ is a type of curse.”

I had unconsciously risen to my knees.

“A curse?!”

“That’s right. Curses can be made using dolls, talismans; there are various

different ways to do it. Amongst them is a method called ‘Kodoku’ that makes use of living things.”

Naru tapped the tatami with his finger.

“There are a lot of traditional methods that have been passed down. But we don’t know what it is really like. That part was probably not transmitted. This is an ancient Chinese method of cursing.

“Kodoku makes use of normal worms. While the golden silkworm is more representative, it is not confirmed what type of worm is really used. In fact there is the use of snakes, centipedes and the like.

“After catching a few of these worms they are placed in a bottle which is buried underground. After a few months the bottle is dug out, and because the worms feed on each other only one remains. Kodoku is a way of cursing that makes use of this worm.”

“How cruel…”

“Yes…

“There are other people who say that the worm is killed and its spirit is controlled, and yet others who extract poison from the worm itself. The worm would haunt the home of the curse user, and bring great riches to that home.

“But the price for that… a person’s life has to be regularly offered in sacrifice to feed that worm. If that is neglected, the worm would eat its owner.”

Ee…

“If one is no longer able to maintain the worm, one must take the property, plus interest, brought by the worm, convert it into gold or silver items, and discard them by the side of the road. This is the so called “Kakinsan”.

“If someone else covets those riches and pick them up, he would be forced to keep the worm.

“Believing that he has picked up a bargain and ignorant of the underlying meaning, the person who unconsciously brings the worm back would end up being eaten by the worm.

“It can also be used as a death curse. After enacting the curse, the worm and

some gold and silver is given to the hated target. As the recipient is unaware of the cause, he would neglect to feed the worm and get eaten by it.

“That should be the original method. After that, this method of cursing was combined with the demon cat method – the curse is on the person that kills the cat to gain control over other spirits – to become the demonic method of killing the remaining worm, and using its spirit to kill the hated target.”

“Wait… wait a moment. The worms are placed in a bottle and allowed to cannibalize on each other… is that right? Isn’t that exactly the same as what is happening in the school?!”

“That’s why I say this is Kodoku.

“Ryokuryou High School is located on an ancient cemetery. Leaving modern cemeteries aside for the time being, ancient cemeteries are sacred places where Kekkais are used to prevent the spirits of the dead from leaving.

“Spirits are summoned into such a place but are unable to leave. That is to say, the spirits are congregated in the school. And the spirits feed on each other within the school. It is completely similar to Kodoku.”

A chill shot down my back. This is such a scary situation.

“Then, if it continues like this what would it become?”

“Only the strongest spirit would remain.”

“And then?”

Naru’s dark look showed a hint of confusion.

“I don’t know…

“If this is somebody’s planned action, the last remaining spirit would be used as a tool in a curse, and the cursed person would die a cruel death. But…”

“But?”

“If this is a randomly occurring incident – for example, by chance, the school is a place that can contain spirits hence such a thing happens – we still don’t know what is going to happen.” The monk said softly.

“The worms used in Kodoku have to be cannibals, right?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“If that’s the case, if only the strongest spirit remains, wouldn’t the school be forced to feed it? Regularly give it a living human.”

“Hey! Don’t discuss that anymore!” Ayako shouted loudly.

“And if this is not done it will eat its owner. Under these circumstances, who is the owner?”

The ones who gathered the spirits were the students in the school. Could it be…

Naru replied calmly. “It should be all the students who summoned the spirits.”

How could it be!

I stared at Naru.

“Hey, is there no way to resolve this?”

“There is, right?”

The monk looked expectantly at Naru.

“Left to me, I am unable to solve anything. But… Lin?”

Naru turned to look towards Lin-san.

Everyone followed his gaze and turned as one to look at Lin-san.

“Lin, can it be done?”

Can he think of a way to solve this problem?

Lin-san tilted his head slightly.

“This so called ‘Kodoku’, is considered a method of cursing that has been considered to have already been lost in transmission. Until today, I, too, have never encountered an incident related to Kodoku.

“If the Kodoku was started as a curse, this would be the same as a simple curse, with a simple resolution. But if it is a randomly occurring Kodoku, I don’t think I will be of any use either.”

Lin-san spoke, playing it down in a completely emotionless voice.

“Lin…”

Even Naru showed a worried face. Lin-san shook his head.

“There is no way to neutralize the danger of the Kodoku. The only way is”

“Gold Married Silkworm.”

“Yes.”

“That is to say… the only way is to pass the curse on to another person?

“That is what I think. To whom should we pass it to then?”

To transfer the spirit onto a person. This was the only way. How could it be…

Naru lifted his head and looked at Lin-san.

“The mutual cannibalism not ended yet, right? The winner has not yet been chosen. That is to say the Kodoku is not yet complete. If we act now is there anything we can do?”

Lin-san shook his head expressionlessly.

“There is no way whatsoever. A curse that has been started cannot be stopped half way.

“For curses, there are only 2 choices: to not begin it at all, or, once started, fully completed. There is definitely no way to stop midway.”

Naru let out a long sigh.

“I’m really sorry, Naru. If this is not a Kodoku that was created for cursing, but a product of random occurrence, there are 2 methods of resolution.”

“Pass it on to a certain person, or to give up and feed this spirit.”

“Yes.”

Feed that spirit… this type of thing is utterly impossible! Kill a person at regular intervals?! Don’t joke anymore!

That’s why I said, we can’t pass it on to someone.

I was silent with despair.

Before long, Naru raised his head resolutely.

“We have yet to confirm it is a Kodoku.

“Or if it is a curse started by somebody at all. If it is a curse, we will leave it to Lin to handle. Until the last possible moment, let us investigate this properly.”

Naru looked around at us. We nodded forcefully.

# Chapter 5 - I was Watching That

## 1

Naru left the room to persuade the principal once more. ‘At least let us have a little more time’ was the message. If the investigation was aborted, and we were evicted from the school, there would be nothing that we could do.

During this period of time the few of us gathered together and discussed whether anyone had found any clues to resolve the problem.

“More investigation is necessary, but the problem is how to investigate, and what we are going to investigate.” The monk grumbled.

“If we are not able to enter the school, our hands would be tied.”

“As you say.”

Ayako sighed.

“How should we proceed now?”

“Don’t just ask others; use your own brain to think a little.”

“Thinking about it you’re the one… sorry, Ayako doesn’t have a brain that can be used.”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?”

Are the two of you not clear about our current situation? Now is not the time for friendly squabbling.

The monk sank into thought, muttering to himself, “Let us try re-organizing this situation.”

Saying that, he raised his hands, clenched as fists.

“Since about the end of the summer vacation, Kokkuri-san has been very popular in the school. This is the start.”

Ayako followed the Monk’s words.

“The summoned spirits loitered around the school.”

“Because by chance the school happens to be a place which can enclose spirits…”

After Yasuhara finished, John followed on and spoke.

“The spirits fed on each other, and the school has turned into a situation of a kodoku.”

Is this a game of continue the sentence?

“Indeed.”

The monk scratched his head.

“I somehow feel there’s something odd – this part about summoning the spirits.

“There shouldn’t be this possibility. Non-psychics perform ten or twenty thousand summonings, and even succeed in calling forth a cannibalistic spirit. There is definitely something hidden in all this. To summon spirits with so little ease, right? … did Naru put it this way?”

That fellow is unable to maintain the tense atmosphere.

“Hey,”

I tried asking.

“Isn’t the so called Worikiri-sama really very strange? It’s the first time I’ve heard of a Kokkuri-san like this.”

The monk nodded.

“En, it’s my first time hearing of it too.”

“I’ve regularly heard of Cupid-san, etc godly manifestations and the like.”

Ayako also tilted her head.

“However, the method of summoning and the rest…”

“Is completely different, and the way it is performed is also very strange, right?

“Ah, right, Ayako hasn’t seen it before, that piece of paper.”

“Paper?!”

“En, the paper used in Worikiri-sama.

“There are the Fifty Sounds, numbers, and ‘yes’ and ‘no’ drawn on top – all of these are very ordinary, right?

“Look, if it is Kokkuri, don’t they usually draw a Torii in the middle? The difference with Worikiri-sama is that a strange symbol is drawn instead.”

“Ke~ What is it like?”

“En~ I can’t remember too clearly. It looked very complicated. There were words written in a circle… the word used was ‘鬼’ (oni, demon). It was creepy.”

“En~ that’s really strange.”

When Ayako was grumbling, Lin-san, who had listened unmoving to our conversation, suddenly grabbed my forearm.

“Did you say the word was ‘鬼’?!”

After asking me that somewhat interrogatingly, Lin-san hurriedly let go of my arm.

“What’s up? Is there anything?”

The Monk’s face was filled with shock.

“What was that paper like? Please try your best to recall that in detail.”

“I don’t remember it. Oh yes, what about Yasuhara-kun? Haven’t you played it before?”

Yasuhara sank deep in thought.

“I also only played it just once before…”

He said that while he took out a loose sheet of note paper.

“That, there is a circle made up of the word ‘鬼’. Then in the middle there are 2

checkered patterned pictures(???)…”

Yasuhara drew the picture out as he thought.

The circle made up of the word ‘鬼’, and inside that were 2 4-cornered (zigzag?)dividing lines. And in the middle of that was the shape of a man.

“There were some words written inside here… I don’t quite know.”

Yasuhara showed his picture to us.

“Yes… it was really like this.”

Lin-san looked like he was squinting, then he spoke in his deep voice.

“Can’t you get hold of this paper?”

“I think I might be able to get something out of catching and intimidating some of the nearby students. Is there a problem with this?”

Lin-san did not answer. Yasuhara picked up the paper with the drawing, and very neatly started writing something on it.

“Yasuhara-kun, was that like this?”

Exactly like this…

“That’s right. Here and here…”

Yasuhara pointed to the blank spaces on either side of the human figure.

“There are some words written here.”

And that is?

“Worikiri-sama… it’s called that, right?

“The way of calling it is from an incantation, right?

“ ‘on, onikilitei, meiritei, meiwayashimaire, sowaka’…”

“Ah, it is this one!”

“Then, after using the paper, it has to be buried somewhere.”

“Yes. That’s what is said to be done. What with being only able to use it once. After using it one has to properly take it to the shrine or something.”

“Shrine…”

Lin-san softly repeated those words, and then he looked straight at Yasuhara.

“Do you know where the shrine is located?”

“Not clearly… but there is only one shrine nearby.”

I glanced out of the window. In the place where the trees flourished was the shrine. I had seen it in my dreams. In the thick fog… Maybe.

“Please bring me there, hurry.”

Wait a moment, Lin-san…

“Hey, Lin.”

Lin-san ignored the Monk’s voice trying to stop him.

Dragging Yasuhara, Lin-san sprinted out of the Work Room.

# 2

In the end all of us followed the two of them to the small shrine.

I jumped in shock.

It was exactly the same as what I had seen in my dream…

The wooden Torii that was going black. The unmoving Inari Kami with flags stuck on it. The small main hall with slopping tiled roof. Only… the thick fog was missing…

Lin-san walked straight up to the Inari Kami. He walked around the small memorial hall investigating something.

Stones were stacked into a pedestal, and a small wooden memorial hall was placed on top. Even the donation box placed in front of the memorial hall was so small it was pathetic.

Lin-san said, after walking around and looking at the memorial hall, “It is not here.”

After that grumble, this time he walked towards the Main Hall. Lin-san studied the floor which was higher than many other temples, and said, “Brown-san.”

He shouted for John.

“I’m sorry, I am unable to crawl in. Please crawl under this floor and take a look.”

To prevent cats and dogs from going under the floor, it was surrounded by a wire mesh. There was a small hole in a dark corner of the front steps. It was a small hole that the nearly 190cm Lin-san could never have crawled into.

John nodded and climbed in. He would definitely get dirt all over him, poor dear.

“Is there anything inside?”

John replied to Lin-san's words.

"There is a bit of paper."

"Just a piece will do, please take it out."

John quickly crawled back out. He coughed a few times gently, and handed the piece of paper to Lin-san.

"This is it."

Lin-san spread out the paper which had been crumpled into a ball, then said, "As expected."

Grumbling softly, Lin-san passed the paper to us. The paper was already soiled. It had the symbol in the center, and the fifty sounds.

"…This is!"

"Is this the paper used to play Worikiri-sama?"

The Monk and I nodded. Yasuhara too, firmly said, "There's no mistake about this. That… this is…"

Why would it be buried in this type of place?

Lin-san's profile was expressionless.

"If you wish for madness, bury it the crossing of paths…"

"Ai?"

"If you wish to kill, bury it beneath the palace."

What?!

Lin-san looked straight ahead.

"This is the seal of the curse. If it is buried beneath a shrine, it can become a killing curse."

… … … …

My ears started to ring.

What was that? Killing curse?

We hurried back to school to look for Naru. We found him when we went back

to the Meeting Room. Naru looked like he had had a serious talk with the principal, but that was not the situation or the problem we wanted to discuss. The problem was that piece of paper.

“Curse Seal?”

Lin-san nodded to Naru’s words.

“Yes. If this is buried at a junction it can make someone else go crazy, if it is buried beneath a shrine it can kill someone.”

Naru was deep in thought, his finger knocking repeatedly on the table. Lin-san continued speaking to his profile.

“Somebody… called this curse seal a Kokkuri prop and spread it around… The ignorant students unconsciously became accessories to murder.”

Naru’s low, clear voice: “Is it confirmed?”

“Yes. Fortunately the ones who made and activated the curse are only outsiders. If it were me, this single piece would have been enough to kill a person.”

… … tsk… …

“If it is like this.”

Naru took the paper from my hands.

“The completely ignorant students, unaware of the consequences, created these curse seals and performed the ritual for a killing curse every day. Incidentally this was used supposedly as a summoning prop; spirits were gathered together… and in the end it became a situation of mutually devouring spirits, it became a Kodoku…”

“Yes, I think it is like this.”

“What will happen when the Kodoku is complete?”

“This person will die.”

Who is it? The target of the killing curse is?

“Matsuyama Hideharu.”

Matsuyama?

“Matsuyama?!” I howled loudly.

It was exactly at that moment. As though in reply to my voice, Matsuyama appeared in the Meeting Room.

# 3

Matsuyama came to a halt suddenly, then gave us an all-over.

“What was that, this rude form of address?!”

All of us looked at Matsuyama. Now was already not the time to be venting anger anymore.

“Have you completed your preparation to leave?”

He said that with a face full of triumph at someone else’s troubles.

Naru’s expression did not change.

“Excuse me, could you please leave for a moment?”

“What the, still scheming about something?”

This fellow! This is clearly not the time for this type of thing!

“I feel that Sensei would be better off not listening to our discussion.”

“Ke~ Why is that?”

Naru quietly picked up that piece of paper, and showed it to Matsuyama.

“What is this thing?”

“A curse seal.”

“Curse seal?!”

“Sensei, are you aware that Kokkuri is popular in the school?”

Matsuyama’s mouth slanted.

“Of course I know. I don’t even know how many times I’ve caught these foolish students.”

“This is the paper used by that Kokkuri.”

“Isn’t this a curse seal?”

“This is a curse seal. Someone masqueraded this curse seal as a new style of Kokkuri an spread it around.”

Matsuyama wrinkled his nose looking very unconvinced.

“And then?”

“Amongst other things, this curse seal can be used for a killing curse. Something used to curse someone and cause their death. Following that, we believe the target of the curse is… you, Matsuyama Sensei.”

Instantaneously, Matsuyama’s face stiffened. Naru turned to look at Lin-san.

“It is like this, right, Lin?”

“It is.”

“And the reason for that is?”

Hearing Naru’s query, Lin-san spread out the paper used for Worikiri-sama. He asked the Monk, “Takigawa-san, are you able to read sanscrit?”

“Ah, En, just about.”

Lin-san displayed the symbol at the center, the symbols on the right of the human figure. With a finger, he pointed to the worm-like words crawling around.

“The target of the curse is written here.”

“… so it is like that… however one looks at it Matsuyama Hideharu is written here.”

Matsuyama looked like he wanted to shout something. His color was also very poor. Lin-san completely ignored all these.

“It doesn’t mean to say that it needs to be written in Sanskrit. And here,” pointing to the left of the human figure, “the age is written here, exactly as seen by everyone.”

“Current age fifty three” was written there.

“Naru, do you know how to read?”

“I’m not too good at Kanji.”

“53 years old this year, this is the meaning.”

“Indeed, he looks about this age.”

Saying that, Naru looked at Matsuyama with a “What do you think about that?” questioning look. Matsuyama nodded.

Lin-san continued.

“It is better to write it in Kanji as it was over here. Or rather, this is the correct way of writing it. However.”

“If Matsuyama’s name were written clearly, anyone would find it suspicious.”

“Yes.”

“Therefore it is purposely written in Sanskrit.”

“I think it is like this.”

Naru’s dark gaze settled beside his own hand; as though Matsuyama’s situation would soon cease to be the main topic.

“The target is Matsuyama… who is the culprit?”

Asking now is pointless… Everyone wanted to know this answer.

“Worikiri-sama started with a first year student in the Aesthetics Department. Furthermore this is not a commonly known spell. Someone not very interested in this type of thing…”

When he heard Naru’s low-toned mumbling, Matsuyama shouted loudly.

“Is it Sakauchi?! It is Sakauchi!”

… Sakauchi-kun. The male student who aspired to become a ghost hunter. And then he died…

Naru nodded.

“It should be him. This incident started around September, just at the start of the second semester. It was mid-September when it really caught on. After that time, Sakauchi-kun committed suicide. I’m afraid he… lit the sparks, and saw the sparks light a fire, then sought his own death.”

The Sakauchi-kun that appeared in my dream, waiting on the roof: he had said before, as though enjoying it greatly, “I’ve seen it…”

That… so it was something like this… However, in the end this Sakauchi-kun also…

Matsuyama groaned balefully.

“Why would that idiot do such a thing?! Why would I…”

Yasuhara glared at Matsuyama.

“Don’t you understand?”

“Understand what…”

“Sensei, do you really not understand the reason why you were chosen?”

Matsuyama was silent.

“Sakauchi-kun left a suicide note. ‘I am not a dog.’ This was the prologue of his suicide note. The school plans to train us like dogs, that’s why we, as students, understand. If someone were to ask who the representative in all this is, even I would reply with Matsuyama-sensei’s name. Because you are the symbol of the school.”

Matsuyama’s face flushed bright red upon being chided by Yasuhara like this. Matsuyama expression changed to one of fury.

Naru expressionlessly stopped Matsuyama who was about to scream in anger.

“It is meaningless even if we now know who the culprit was. Right, Lin?”

Following Naru’s gaze, Matsuyama’s greenish face looked at Lin-san.

“Yes. The curse has already been activated. Even the one who made the curse cannot stop it. The spirits mutually devour each other to complete the Kudoku – this is the only even we are waiting for now.”

“Is there no way at all?!”

Matsuyama shouted.

Even Matsuyama didn’t say things like “what nonsense”. Still harboring conflicting emotions, we looked at Matsuyama who was stuck in an awkward position.

“The solutions are?”

Naru asked the cool Lin-san.

“None.”

“The curse can be reflected back, right?”

… reflect the curse back…?

“That can be done. Is it all right to reflect the curse back?”

Naru sank deep into thought.

Long silence.

“… with this too there is no alternative.”

Naru looked coolly and darkly at Matsuyama.

“Although it’s a person whom I will not feel sorry for even if he died, I cannot stand aside and let him be killed. Reflect the curse back.”

“… If that is your wish.”

Naru momentarily wore a dark look.

“That’s right.”

Matsuyama was clearly gawking.

“Wait… wait a moment! I don’t understand what you are saying!”

I could not help shouting out.

“What are you talking about? Hey?!”

“Mai.”

Naru spoke with a low voice.

“What we call ‘reflect the curse’ is to send the curse back to the curser.”

Ok.

“There are only about 4 large spirits left in the school. The winner would be chosen from amongst these 4. Regardless of which spirit it is, we are already unable to handle it; I will not consider such an option that will put our lives in danger. Do I want to see Matsuyama killed in front of my own eyes? When the Kudoku is complete, Matsuyama would only be waiting for death. And I’m afraid

it would be a terribly cruel death.”

The cannibalizing spirits… very soon only the evilest spirit would remain. That spirit, to Matsuyama…

“No. This scenario is no good at all.”

“If that’s the case then shut up. Does anyone else have a different opinion?”

No one replied to Naru. No one could say something in the vein of just let him die. Not lest with the very subject right in front of us.

“It is just like this.”

Naru raised his head to look at Lin-san.

“Yes.”

Matsuyama started laughing softly. It was a laugh of relief. It was a laugh of having pleaded with people whom he had called con-men, and being saved by those very people. Although it affected my emotions, it didn’t exactly make me angry.

Naru turned to look at the laughing Matsuyama.

“You are the cause. Please remember this point.”

Naru looked severely at Matsuyama; Matsuyama ceased his laughter and turned to avoid Naru’s gaze.

The Monk asked softly.

“But Naru-chan, Sakauchi-kun is already dead. Is it possible to reflect the curse back to a dead person?”

“Curses cannot be reflected back to dead people, and this has got no relation to Sakauchi at all.”

Naru said stiffly.

“The curser was not him.”

The entire scene suddenly froze.

“If the curse is reflected back, the curse would return to the curser. Disregarding whether or not they knew of the consequences, the ones who

activated the curse are the students.”

----.

What? What did you say?

The students are the cursers?!

Everyone in the room started shouting.

“Naru… wait… a moment.”

My voice turned hoarse.

“If this is the case… then, everyone will…”

My gaze automatically landed on Yasuhara. His face had turned green.

“Have those 4 evil spirits… reflect back on those who have played Worikiri-sama before?”

Naru turned to look at me. I could not move with Naru’s deeper than black stare pinning me.

“I should have already explained this.”

“Don’t do this, Naru!”

“Don’t do what?”

His ice cold gaze allowed for no further expression.

“Reflect the curse back? Allow Matsuyama be killed?”

I didn’t say it like that…

“Even you’ve turned stupid. Without discussing whether they knew or not, the students activated the curse. Even if they never receive any punishment from the law, they are in fact accessories to murder. Reflect the curse back to them. The one who is the cause of all this will regret it for life. Is this not what is called fair?”

It’s not like this… This is much more complicated and ambiguous.

“Yasuhara-kun… can you understand?”

Yasuhara, who had only played Worikiri-sama only once – we would also be

reflecting the curse onto him.

“… I understand.”

He nodded, with a deathly pale face.

“If the curse is reflected back, what will happen to us?”

“The number of cursers is too big. The strength will be dispersed; the effectiveness should also be diminished. Theoretically it is like this. Please pray that this will be the case.”

… Wait a moment, this is so cruel.

Yasuhara nodded.

“We were the ones who asked you to resolve this case. If this is the only way.”

“There is no other way.”

“Then we are counting on you.”

A hint of a smile appeared on Yasuhara’s pale face.

It was so simple. Too simple.

“What about Matsuyama?!”

I shouted. Matsuyama’s body suddenly shrunk a little.

“Matsuyama is the only one who is protected, but the others cannot be protected?! Only this person is in the safe zone without having to undergo any punishment?! This is too sly!”

“You’re really stupid.”

“Regardless of who it is, no matter what type of person it is, there is no reason for him to be killed.”

What Naru said was right. Even I, who was extremely confused, understood. However…

“Exactly. There is also no reason to kill everyone. Yasuhara-kun too… he clearly only played it once! He clearly never thought of cursing another person!!”

“Everyone must be responsible for their own actions.”

“Everyone didn’t know!”

“Ignorance is not an excuse.”

That cool voice. And that disgustingly beautiful expression.

I hate him to death, that Naru. Despite his reason he is completely heartless. I hate him, I hate him, I hate him!

Naru turned back to look to Lin-san, who was waiting shadow-like.

“Lin. Start the preparations.”

“Yes.”

# 4

Taking Lin-san with him, Naru left the Meeting Room.

We were left behind.

Unaware of the time, the darkness of dusk settled over us. The lights were forgotten so the room was so dark that we could not see each other's expressions.

No one had anything to say. Even I could not say a word.

Although Matsuyama had sneaked out and left the Meeting Room, we still didn't feel like talking.

Naru was right. Based on principles he is absolutely correct. And there were not that many paths we could have chosen. Amongst them the best one… at least the best one to Naru, he chose this one, and he is probably not wrong. No matter how cruel a choice it was.

Even if my brain could accept this argument my heart could not.

Everyone was completely ignorant. None of them hated Matsuyama so much to the level of wanting him dead.

… However.

I don't want this. I can't approve of this result. I can never approve of this type of thing no matter how hard I try.

Naru must be stopped. Something like this must be stopped.

I moved my stiff legs and stood up.

"Mai."

Ayako hurriedly grasped my forearm.

"Give it up; this is already something we cannot change."

“I don’t want to.”

“What are you saying ‘don’t want to’, you!”

I forcefully shrugged off Ayako’s hand, then ran out of the Meeting Room in the same movement.

Don’t tell me that there is no other way!

There must be some other way!!

“Mai!”

“Mai-san!”

I ignored their calls and sprinted away.

“… not here…”

I set down the receiver. I was at a phone booth near the school.

Although I had thoroughly searched the nearby places, I didn’t see Naru. I was a little concerned that the car was no longer in the car park; I thought they might have gone back to the office.

I called the office but nobody replied. Basically neither Taka nor I can receive calls in the office. I made several calls to Taka’s home, and I finally found Taka who had returned home from the office.

“How is it? Is the investigation progressing well? It’s really incredible, there were reporters and all that gathered in front of the office. But I did as boss told me to and told them there was no comment.”

That was ignorant Taka’s innocent voice.

“Taka… Taka!”

Ah ah, this is not important at all!

“What’s up, Mai?”

Taka’s voice turned uneasy.

“What about Naru? Did he not return to the office?”

“En, he didn’t come back. Isn’t he over on your side?”

“Not here. I’ve already searched. If Naru is not stopped…”

I broke off. What should I do…

“I understand. Boss is not there, right?”

Taka said with a firm voice. Although I have not explained a thing to Taka regarding this incident.

“You want to look for boss, right? I will return to the office now to take a look.”

Taka…

“I will go now; I will leave the moment I hang up. When I get there, you call the office. I will spend the entire night tonight waiting in the office.”

“Thank you…”

Once more I searched the places nearby. After counting the time I made another call to the office. Naru had not returned to the office. Taka also said it didn’t look like they had been there while she(?) was away.

If only I knew how to contact Naru’s home at such a time.

Giving up hope, I replaced the receiver. What I saw in front of me was the pitch-black school compound. The Meeting Room was not lit. Who knows where everyone else had gone.

“Naru must be found.”

After finding him, I will stop him.

I don’t mean to abandon Matsuyama. No one deserves to be sent to death.

However, there must be some other way. There must be.

I left the phone booth, and walked close to the school gates. The gates reflected a cool glow. Iron gates.

“… have the remaining 4 spirits…”

My hand touched the gate.

If only those things disappeared. If I do this…

I poured all my strength into my arms, and heaved myself onto the gate. From the gate I jumped down. The moment my feet touched the ground I ran towards

the field.

# 5

The front door was open. From there I entered the school compound.

I was empty handed. What I knew was only some half-assed exorcism techniques. With that I couldn't possibly achieve anything.

"However, one won't know unless one tries."

Yes, I won't know unless I try.

I walked through the dark corridor. First, there was one over here…

I gathered up my courage and opened the door.

When the door opened, I felt a wave of dizziness.

The equipment that should have been set up here had disappeared. Furthermore, the floor inside was completely covered with water. A dim light oscillated. The air swirled. I suddenly felt a wave of nausea.

I took a step forward into the room. Immediately my feet sank down. It was like stepping on a wet sponge.

I gathered up the seal with both hands. It was the hasty exorcism technique of an outsider like me.

"Naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan."

As I was reciting the incantation, suddenly it felt like someone else had appeared in the room.

The room was pitch-black. At most, I could see only the weak light shining through the corridor. Water dripped from the ceiling. My shadow vaguely appeared in the room, on the wall facing me.

"Naumaku, sanmamda, bazaradan, kan."

Gurgle.

The mysterious, deep sound came from beneath my feet. Extending across the floor, the entire puddle of water… From the puddle not more than 5 cm deep, arose white bubbles one by one. It looked like there was someone breathing beneath the water. Water dripped off the ceiling onto my face.

“Naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan.”

I released the Acalanatha Seal and gathered the Sword Seal.

Rin (臨). – Across.

Once more, a drop hit my face and forehead.

Pyō (兵). – Down.

Immediately the bubbles beneath my feet rose up. Waves appeared on the surface of the water; as though the room too was shaking.

Tō (闘). – Across.

Water dripped down; as though it was raining. Rain wet my hair and face; droplets fell from my wet hair. More bubbles appeared by my feet. My feet sank down.

Sha (者). – Down.

It was pouring. I felt the droplets sliding across my skin were a little warm. There was a slight odor. It was vague.

Kai (皆). – Across.

My shadow cast on the wall directly in front of me started to swell. That was no longer my shadow. Through the weak light, the droplets fell relentlessly down.

Jin (陣). – Down.

The droplets falling on my forehead rolled pitter patter towards my eye lids. Just as the water was about to enter my eyes, the vision of my right eye was dyed completely red.

Retsu (列). – Across.

Even in the dark, my hand criss-crossing continuously was also visibly red. All of it was, all these line-like things, were all blood! My entire body was drenched

with blood.

Zai (在). – Down.

The shadow that floated on the wall turned back to look at me. It bent its body low and stopped there. Once more a gurgling sound could be heard, and a white object floated up by my feet. It was a pale human face. Only the tip of its nose was above the water.

“Zen (前)!”

The Sword Seal cut vertically downwards.

“Be gone!”

Instantly the floor started bubbling furiously. A man, as white as wax, stood up next to me. Simultaneously, the shadow that had been stuck against the wall flew over.

My feet was caught, I retreated backwards.

“Naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan!”

One more time. I have to continue, no matter how many times, until I succeed!

A black object cut through the air and flew towards my shoulder. In front of my eyes was a crowd of 2 dimensional wax-like figures. The blood from the room seeped into the corridor.

“Naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan!”

The figures in front of me all suddenly raised both hands. Unconsciously I took another step backwards.

“Naumaku, sanmanda, bazaradan, kan!”

I, who had taken yet another step back as though to escape, suddenly felt a pair of hands grasp me from behind. Behind?! Before I could even think, the wax figures quickly crowded around me.

“Rin (臨)!”

I cut a straight horizontal line through the air.

The torso of the wax figures split straight open and fell down with a thump. At

the same time the pair of hands behind me circled my neck to pull me down.

--Ah ah, this won't work – as expected if I were alone!

I had fallen and my vision was bright red because of the blood.

When I was pulled strongly over, I fell towards the wall nearer to the corridor. My breath completely stopped.

"On, kirikiri, bazaar, bashiri, hora, manda, manda, on, hata!"

Crack was the sound of hard objects colliding. A golden glow extended from the floor of the corridor into a straight line.

"Monk?!"

The Monk, who had been drawing something on the floor with his golden ritual tool, looked towards me.

The monk continued to draw lines. The blood that had spilled from the Printing Room disappeared, as though drawn through a small wound. It was like it had fallen off a precipice.

Without further ado, the Monk grabbed my arm. Just like that he carried me and left the Printing Room. At the end of the corridor was the green glow of the emergency light. Beneath the light were some familiar faces.

John, Ayako, Masako.

I was really scared to death.

As though I had been released from my bonds, I leapt in the direction of everyone. I jumped into Ayako's open arms. Ayako caught me and fell sitting onto the floor.

"You… idiot!!"

The Monk, who had been panting at the side, now towered in front of me.

"Is this an opponent you can handle with your level of skill in exorcism? Do you really want to die that much, you big moron!!"

Getting scolded by the Monk like that, I curled up into a ball. Ayako hugged me from behind.

“It does not matter anymore. Great, we’ve caught up with you.”

Ayako’s voice was really too gentle, I couldn’t stop my tears.

“Let’s go. We have to leave the school quickly.”

John helped Ayako and me up. Masako laid my hand on her shoulder. Her yellow kimono was instantly stained with red.

I stopped my tears. Sniffing, I was helped out of the dark school by everyone.

# 6

Taking the Monk's car, we went to Ayako's apartment.

When we arrived in the room which was as green as an ancient forest, I was brought to the bathroom. Looking into the mirror, I was completely red, as though I had just swam in a pool of blood.

I set the hot water to shower from above my head, giving myself a thorough wash. The bathroom, too, was filled with numerous unnamed bonsais. Ayako really appreciates plants. I can't help feeling it's interesting that the pair aren't quite complementary.

When I walked out of the bathroom after putting on clothes handed to me by Ayako, she was cleaning the stain on Masako's Kimono.

"Have you calmed down?"

"En… Sorry."

Ayako handed the soiled cloth to John and went into the kitchen to heat me some milk. With a little granulated sugar, it had a mild alcoholic smell. Ayako, who handed the cup to me; and the Monk, who was smoking, were both covered in blood.

Ayako took a towel, covered my head and helped me dry my hair.

"You've taken years off my life."

"Sorry."

"Really... You're really an impatient and reckless person."

En…

"Something that none of us can do, you probably can't do it as well."

Yes…

“I understand Mai-san’s feelings, but that is already an undeniable fact.”

John used a gentle voice to speak. Ayako dried my hair forcefully; the milk in the cup swished.

“All’s well ends well.”

Suddenly the Monk stood up.

“Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom for a moment.”

“That’s fine, but don’t mess up my place.”

“If you have a change of clothes for me I’d be very pleased.”

“I don’t have clothing suitable for men here. How about a towel to wrap around?”

“Hey hey.”

The monk waved smugly. He looked like he had been drenched in blood.

“Monk.”

I called after the back which had turned completely red.

“Thank you… and sorry.”

The monk barked a laugh. Ayako immediately said, “what are you laughing at so simple mindedly; you are laughing like Jason.”

Pfft - John burst out laughing. Indeed, he looked like a serial killer heading off to wash the blood splattered on his own body.

“Hey, Mai you can’t laugh too.”

After that, when the Monk had entered the bathroom, we could not control ourselves anymore and laughed out loud.

We kept talking about other irrelevant matters; just like that I know not what time I fell asleep.

The next morning Ayako woke me up.

“Mai, let’s go.”

As Ayako spoke to me, I opened my eyes.

“The school?”

Ayako, who had already dressed, nodded. The monk and John and Masako – everyone had already prepared to leave. Did everyone get any sleep last night?

“You’ve also decided to see this to the end, right? I think there isn’t much time left before the Kodoku is completed. If this is the case Naru will probably act today.”

“Yes...”

I dragged my heavy body up.

Naru wanted to reflect the curse, returning it to the students who had activated it…

# 7

The school was deserted in the morning.

After we entered the school, we were a little in awe.

“I completely cannot sense the presence of anyone –“

The monk raised his head and looked at the school compound. It was like it was a rest day.

“Where is Naru?”

Ayako said, “Let’s go. Anyway let’s head to the Meeting Room to check.”

“If we are discovered by the teachers, won’t we be chased away?”

“We’ll deal with it when it arises.”

We crept silently to the Meeting Room. Next door was the Office. There wasn’t the shadow of a person around there.

“What happened?”

The monk studied the surroundings. The gymnasium was in front of us. Unconsciously we walked nearer to the gymnasium, and looked at it through the windows below, that were used to let light in.

“It is here.”

A whispered voice. I, too, bent down to look. The students were waiting in the gymnasium. It should be time for morning assembly. In the world closed in by the windows, I couldn’t hear any sound from inside. I could only see the figures of students lined up in neat rows.

“Let’s go, the time is now.”

With Ayako’s urging, we ran through the doorway.

We had already taken the staircase next to the door towards the third floor.

We went all the way to the front of the Meeting Room, and peeked inside. Quietly opening the door and looking inside, we saw the figures of Naru and Lin-san.

“Yo.”

The Monk opened the door wide. Naru looked back and frowned.

“What are you all doing back here?” (naru) “I was still wondering how you guys will do it.” (ayako?) “Don’t you need our help?” (masako?)

“I’m here only to join the fun.” (monk)

“This isn’t an exhibition.” (naru again) Naru sighed. Lin-san remained beside the table, and did not even raise his head. On the table there were candles and flat alms bowls made of metal. In the alms bowls were white notes with some Kanji written on them. Unknown incense burnt in the censer, filling the air with smoke. Lin-san sat very straight on the chair without moving, and held a straight golden colored knife in his hand.

Lin-san was about to make the curse… planned to take this curse with severe consequences and reflect it back to the cursers. The cursers: all the students who had summoned Worikiri-sama before. Of course, that included Yasuhara.

My body started shivering unconsciously. I felt that this job had come to the end of a phase.

“Lin-san, don’t continue anymore!” I could not help exclaiming.

“I beg you, Naru, please make Lin-san stop!”

Naru replied in a cool and severe tone, “Are you still saying these foolish things?”

“It’s not foolish! Nobody ever did anything bad! No one planned to curse Matsuyama to death!”

Naru’s ice-cold gaze fixed unmoving on me.

“Get out. You are interfering with work.”

“No!”

I grasped Lin-san’s shoulders.

“I beg you! Lin-san, please stop!!”

Just like that Lin-san gently closed both eyes without moving his body. Naru grabbed my hands.

“Get out.”

“No! Everyone is here, inside the gymnasium. Aren’t completely oblivious? About what they have done and what will happen to themselves.”

Without further ado, Naru pulled my hand and dragged me out of the Meeting Room.

“Naru, wait a while, don’t do this, don’t be this rough.”

Ayako’s voice halted Naru. That shoulder was also given a push, “Everybody out! Don’t interfere with Lin!”

“Hey, Naru.”

Naru studied us with a dark look.

“I’ve said it, everybody out.”

Masako was the first to leave. Next was the Monk. Following that was John and Ayako. I was the only one who persisted in staying in the Meeting Room. Grabbing my arm, Naru dragged me out of the meeting room.

“Naru! What exactly are you planning to do! Why do you save Matsuyama, but abandon everyone else in the face of death?! No one had any evil intention at all; they clearly never thought of cursing Matsuyama at all!!”

I felt that my words were heartlessly ignored. Naru forcefully dragged me outside, shut the door of the Meeting Room, then barricaded the entrance of the Meeting Room.

“Cold blooded.”

Naru did not reply.

“Everyone might be unconscious accomplices in activating the curse, perhaps they all wanted to kill Matsuyama. But, you, who plan to kill everyone like this, what does one consider you to be?!”

No response.

“A murderer. As long as the situation is resolved, the future consequences are irrelevant.”

His face wore a nauseatingly beautiful expression.

“Who will die, and who will cry, whatever happens it’s all OK.”

“Mai.”

In place of the completely unresponsive Naru, the Monk patted my shoulder.

“That’s enough. This is an inevitable situation.”

“It’s not a hopeless situation at all!”

If the curse is returned, what will happen to everyone? Okamura-san and her friends, Araki-san and her friends, Miyazaki-san and her friends, and the class of 3-1? … Yasuhara…

Such a thing must not be done!

“… Mai.”

“No!”

Naru was really completely expressionless. Using a cold voice, he said, “Monk, take Mai away.”

“Ah ah. – Let’s go, Mai.”

“I said no!”

Carrying the struggling me, the Monk left the Meeting Room.

No, no, no!

This must not be done. It definitely must not!

The Monk brought me to the stairs and forcefully sat me down.

“Monk, go and stop him! Make him stop!”

The Monk gently patted my cheek.

“Believe in Naru.”

… Monk.

“Has Naru ever betrayed our hopes?”

“… But.”

“Has he ever?”

“… no…”

“Then believe in him. It’ll be all right.”

“But.”

“The young man Yasuhara is amongst those students. Do you think that I’m not worried?”

The Monk looked serious. His eyes took in my sorrowful expression.

“… Ok…”

“Such a good child.”

I buried my face between my knees. Tears fell pitter patter, seeped through my skirt, and wet my feet.

The Monk sat beside me and gently caressed my head.

I don’t know how much time passed.

Suddenly a noise resounded from behind me. There was the presence of people. Unconsciously I stood up.

Just as I was turning, Naru etc was about to turn the corner in the corridor.

“Is it done? Really?”

Ayako asked Naru.

“Ah.”

The moment I heard Naru’s answer, I raced down the stairs.

“Mai!”

That was the Monk’s voice. Don’t stop me.

It is done? Then what about everyone? Everyone waiting in the Gymnasium?

I rode the momentum and flew down the stairs. I dashed out of the door and ran towards the Gymnasium. I heard the sound of footsteps of someone chasing behind me and voices telling me to stop.

I arrived in front of the Gymnasium, placed both hands on the thick and heavy iron door, and pushed it open with all my strength.

… … … …

… … … …

… this is… what?!

I stared blankly at the scene in the Gymnasium.

On the floor of the Gymnasium, the neat rows were now scattered, into piles of human dolls.

“… but, just now it…”

I mumbled softly.

But the ones waiting here just now were people. It was really students lining up here.

I walked into the Gymnasium. I picked up a doll by my feet. It was a wooden board cut into a human figurine, and even had a note stuck on it.

Doll. I ran my fingers over the doll. Part of the arm and chest broke off and fell.

A white hand reached out from my side and picked up the broken pieces.

“… Naru.”

Naru looked at that fragment. He quickly looked around, checking the dolls around us.

It looked like every single doll appeared to have sustained damage somewhere.

“Naru… this is…”

The Monk shouted.

“Confirm the state of the dolls. Gather the dolls that have not been damaged.”

“… Ah.”

The Monk wore a complicated expression of slight confusion and relief.

“Matsuzaki-san, Hara-san, … Mai.”

“—Yes.”

“You will separately check the names on the dolls that have not been damaged, and call those people. Their names are on the notes. Check the telephone numbers in the register, and then ask if this person is all right. Use the telephone in the office.”

“… Yes.”

At the same time, the Monk and John abruptly walked into the pile of dolls.

… don’t tell me this is…

There was a certain time Naru had previously used dolls. He had said that they were made by Lin-san. They are used as body doubles for people.

They were used as curse tools, by focusing one’s hate on the doll and driving a nail into it. And the reverse.

By taking sickness and transferring it to the doll, and letting it get cleansed by a flowing river, it is used as a tool to heal sickness.

Body double…

The curse was returned to the body doubles of the students.

To the dolls which were unfortunately as numerous as the number of students.

# 8

The result of the phone calls from the office was there wasn't a single student whose doll was not damaged who had anything abnormal happen.

"Is there anything abnormal? No, right?"

I called the last student's home.

"This question is a little random, but have you ever played the game Worikiri-sama that is so popular in school before? – yes. Ah, you have not. I understand. Thank you."

I hung up.

Masako and Ayako looked at me.

"That person said there's nothing wrong."

Ayako clapped her hands.

"That's done!"

The curse that was to be reflected back to the players of Worikiri-sama – the students who activated it – had been completely transferred to the dolls. In the end various parts of the dolls were damaged… the undamaged dolls belonged to students who had no link to the curse.

Ayako gave me a hug.

"That's great, that's incredible, Mai."

"En…"

We gave each other high-fives.

"How is it?"

John appeared in the office.

"It's fine. Everyone's fine!!"

John’s face glowed.

“What ‘fine’?”

I turned to look at the Monk who had entered the office. The Monk took out the thing in his hands.

Dolls that were damaged in various places. I looked at the name tag. “Araki Kozue”, “Okamura Kazumi”, “Miyazaki Masayo”… “Yasuhara Osamu”.

… Everyone is fine. The dolls had borne the curse. It’s fine…

I gently hugged the dolls I received from the Monk. He caressed my head.

I flew out of the office.

Where is Naru?

I looked into the Gymnasium, and searched my surroundings.

… Over there.

He was solitarily gazing at the field.

“Naru!”

The normal, beautiful expressionless face turned back.

“How is it?”

“Everyone is fine. They all said they had never played Worikiri-sama.”

“Is that so?”

A small, satisfied smile rose to his lips.

“The dolls… were everyone’s body doubles?”

“So you know this?”

… wu. Of course I know something at this level.

“Today the school is?”

“I persuaded the principal to stop classes. I said to have everyone stay at home and await further instructions.”

Was that the case?

“It had been properly discussed with the principal before.”

“Because Matsuyama helped us out.”

… so it was like that.

“Hey, if you are using dolls as substitutes, wouldn’t just making a doll for Matsuyama do?”

I stood beside Naru.

“Four spirits versus one person or versus six hundred people, which do you think is safer?”

… is it… ?

“… You should have told us so earlier.”

If you had told us that you were transferring it onto the dolls… that you planned to use dolls as substitutes…

“Transferring the curse is very difficult. Even Lin cannot guarantee saving everyone.”

“… but.”

I’ve said some terrible things to Naru. I have to apologize. I’ve said some hateful words, I’m sorry.

… Yes. Hate. I do hate Naru a little. I hate the part of him that refused to grant us a little relief. Clearly it’d be all right if he simply explained to me. At least if he said something like, “I will try my best, believe in me.” If he did, clearly regardless of whatever happened next, I would believe in him, I would also be at ease.

“I’m sorry.”

Huh?

Naru’s profile is really extremely beautiful.

“I’ve said some terrible things. I’m sorry.”

…Naru.

“Because Mai is very considerate of others… It must have been very painful, I’m sorry.”

… … … …

My tears had welled up. I wanted to cry out loud. Whether it was in pain or in joy, I was not too clear.

So, I used all my energy to shout at the top of my voice.

“That’s too sly!!!”

“… ha?”

Naru jumped in shock.

“I clearly wanted to apologize! But for you to say it first, Naru you’re too sly!!”

“Ah, that.”

“You, Naru, always take whatever advantage there is! That’s too sly!”

“Hey.”

“Because Naru is really very sly.”

Naru expression turned into one of resigning the fight. He extended his white hand, and suddenly tapped my forehead.

Following that he smiled slightly, then walked in the direction of the office. Naru’s cat-like soft footsteps were very warm.

“Let’s burn and cleanse these.”

Lin-san looked at the mountain of dolls piled in the Gymnasium. Naru nodded.

“This would be safer. – Monk, we’re counting on you.”

“Yeah.”

When we were collecting the dolls, the Monk had built a fire-altar in the corner of the school compound. The dolls were piled on this.

The Monk lit the fire. The flames licked the sky and swallowed everything.

# Epilogue

Welcome Welcome. Tokyo, Shibuya, Dougenzaka.

In the coffee shop beneath the offices of “Shibuya Psychic Research”…

Today was the party to show appreciation our efforts. We had planned to have a really great party, and celebrate the solving of our hardest case to date.

Ai ai, basically we had all told Naru and Lin-san of this event. But I guess there is no chance that those 2 will come.

“The prize for the best effort has to go to Mai this time.”

When Ayako heard the Monk’s words, she started laughing.

“Shouldn’t she be getting the reckless prize?”

“Well said!”

It was Taka and Chiaki-senpai who spoke in a cool tone. After that was Yasuhara.

“… you actually did something so reckless! I really don’t know what you are thinking Mai!”

Taka shouted at me, “Exactly. You must value yourself… or rather you should have greater self awareness, Ok…”

Taka grumbled to Chiaki-senpai, “Exactly. Hearing what they said took years off my life. If I had known she would do this type of thing I would have locked her up.”

Even Yasuhara criticized me like that.

“… Am I a dog?” I tried retorting.

Everyone spoke with one voice: “Yes!”

… Really, don’t say that so forcefully…

“Oh Mai, it’s because you lack self awareness that you bark wildly at others.”

After Ayako finished, Masako continued,

“Ai ya, the transfer was just completed. It’s only that the other party minded playing with her.”

“That was well said. Aren’t there a lot of things like this? Even when it meets a thief it doesn’t bark but wags it tail instead, an affectionate little puppy.”

The monk is really too much, hn hn.

John said one sentence “Mentioning that…” and turned to Yasuhara.

“I heard you guys held a ceremony for that first year student to pacify his spirit.”

Yasuhara nodded.

“En. The entire school all together… because the school believed that this was due to his haunting. The ceremony was organized by the student council… and I was finally able to retire.”

“Is that so? Young man Yasuhara is already a third year and was still the council president.”

The monk’s words had an inkling of dissatisfaction.

“It’s like this. It is clearly time for exams, really. Because there wasn’t a candidate to take over. In the end there would be a way.”

I tried asking, “Matsuyama… did he say anything?”

Like apologize or something.

“Nothing at all. But he will always have his own opinions. He didn’t complain much during the ceremony.”

“Not much… put like that, you are saying he did grumble a little?”

“As I said. He *has* reached that age; it’s not that easy to change. He probably has his own plans. What we call ‘adults’ are such creatures.”

En… Perhaps it may be.

The Monk flung the bag containing the straws to Yasuhara.

“Young people must definitely never become that type of adult.”

“Ai ya, already speaking with an adult tone.”

“If I am more mature will other people feel my charm, right?”

“Of course *heart*.”

That, hey hey?

“You, don’t send the *heart*s flying.”

“You’re very happy, right *heart*?”

… Wu. The Monk still wants to tease Yasuhara.

“But young Yasuhara, you very scared at that time, right?”

“Ah, you are talking about the time when the curse was reflected?”

“Exactly. Although you spoke very pretty words~. We’ll only talk about it here.”

Having the Monk talk about him like that, Yasuhara rolled his eyes.

“However, I believed.”

“Believed who?”

The Monk questioned. Suddenly everyone was looking at Yasuhara.

“Myself.”

… Ai ya ai ya ai ya.

“—because I don’t recall having ever done anything evil that would make me deserve to die so young.”

… en, perhaps this is right.

“Keeping it within these 4 walls, I honestly believed that regardless of what happened, I would definitely be saved.”

“… you’ll definitely live a very long life.”

“Of course, I do have plans for that.”

Said with absolute certainty, Yasuhara’s words caused the monk to cradle his head (ie, facepalm).

En, Yasuhara's acting skills are better.

Laughing out loud, Taka forcefully tugged my clothes, and slanted his/her head.

"What about Mai?"

"Me?"

"Justice was defeated by horror, is it not like this?"

Ah…

"I don't think so. Taniyama-san's situation is…"

Yasuhara was the one who spoke. Then, as though they had rehearsed beforehand, everyone chorused: "not having thought through anything at all!"

- precisely! I did not think through anything at all! Anyway I'm a person without self awareness.

The Monk used a tone of admiration and expressed his discontent.

"En, amongst all of us the one with the longest lifespan is Mai."

"Well said."

"Exactly."

Can you not make use of other people as your source of entertainment?

Yes, yes. Anyway I will have a very long life.

Yeah, I'll live a long life just to show you all. Despite wars breaking out; despite the coming of the scary demon king, I will continue to live on. If the human race goes extinct leaving only me alive, I will dominate the planet without so much as lifting a finger!

I wanted to laugh out loud with the sun setting behind me.

Taniyama Mai, age 16: although her intuition is more accurate than normal, she is still an unfortunate young woman whose rank has not improved.

Is it like this?